

Developing a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Missional, Anabaptist Leadership Training Platform

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## Certification Page

Certified, that the work contained herein is my own, except where noted and cited.

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5/26/2022 Date

Certified, that the work contained herein, has been conducted ethically, within the parameters of the institutional review process, to the best of our knowledge, and is appropriate for fulfilling the objectives of the Doctor of Theology dissertation.

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Discipleship matters. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told the story of the shepherd who left the 99 sheep who were safely in the sheepfold and went to search for the one who was lost. Each one matters to Jesus and each one should matter to us as well. Regardless of context, language barriers, socioeconomic status, gender or anything else, the Gospel has the power to change lives today! We are called to make a difference in our sphere of influence.

In considering this project, my prayer is that we will catch the vision and join God on his mission to redeem the world he created and loves with an everlasting love. To that end, the purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study is to develop a 21st century missional, leadership formation training platform for the church leader based on a Jesus-centered, Anabaptist focused, kingdom approach to discipleship.

### **General Statement**

In the past two years, as the world has been gripped by a global pandemic, the chaotic shaking and dismantling that ensued has thrust some segments of the Church into crisis mode. The shaking has revealed questionable allegiances and exposed faulty ideologies that were hidden in plain sight in our church pews. In the book, *Radical Discipleship*, author Lee Camp (2008) questions, “Could it be that ‘Jesus is Lord’ has become one of the most widespread Christian lies? Have Christians claimed the Lordship of Jesus yet systematically set aside the call to obedience to this Lord?” (p. 20).

This allegiance to someone and something other than Jesus is not new. As Conrad Kanagy (2007) states in his book, *Road Signs for the Journey*, “Through the centuries, the people

of God consistently followed their own paths, choosing shortcuts that led nowhere and building highways that brought terror and destruction” (p.19). There are no shortcuts to discipleship.

Early in my tenure with LMC (formerly known as the Lancaster Mennonite Conference), a survey was sent to all LMC congregations. Several of the questions related to discipleship within local congregations. Of the responses received, there were some from congregational leaders who noted that there were no or few children and youth in their congregations. Passing on the faith to the next generation is critical to sustain the discipleship movement.

### **Statement of the Challenge**

In looking to the future of discipleship in the Church, there are a number of questions that could be asked, some of which will be addressed later. For now, the primary question to ask may be: Is Jesus Lord? My sense is that there is hope. There are those who are fanning the flames of their first love. Yes, Jesus is Lord, and he is the Light of this world.

In the time of Jesus, when the large crowds followed him, he turned and said to them, “And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples” (Luke 14:27,33 NIV). This invitation from Jesus was radical. It was above and beyond what most teachers of that day would have required. Upon hearing these words of Jesus, there were those who chose not to follow. Camp comments that

the word *radical* simply means ‘to the root’. And it is in this sense that the Christian faith *is* radical: it demands thoroughgoing transformation, thoroughgoing conversion of every realm of human endeavor, in personal relations, economics, and politics, in homes, culture and social order. The gospel demands radical discipleship (Camp, 2008, p. 28).

Alan Hirsch (2016), founder of Forge Mission Training Network, in his book *The Forgotten Ways*, notes that

DIY/designer Christianity is a form of diluted, consumerist, and syncretized faith that, in my opinion, has in the context of postmodern pluralism and relativism become a genuine threat to the church in the West precisely because it distances us from the real vigor of our original and primary message (p. 196).

Hirsch is challenging the Church to return to that radically rooted faith in which all gifts are functioning and doing their part to build up the body of Christ.

When our discipleship is not radical, it can become weak and anemic, failing to transform those claiming Jesus as Lord. Is there such a thing as easy discipleship? In Revelation 2, the letter to the Church at Ephesus, John wrote:

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place (Revelation 2:4, 5 NIV).

According to these verses in Revelation, this church in Ephesus was struggling with their first love and commitment to Jesus as Lord. The call to repent was given in love as an invitation to restore the relationship. Movement Leader's Collective, a missional training movement, notes that repentance is rooted in the Greek word *metanoia*, which can be defined as "wholehearted change: changing the heart and mind of the leader and organization in order to reframe current and future reality" (Movement Leaders Collective, 2021). In reframing reality, we are talking about a paradigm shift, a fundamental change in underlying assumptions, which in turn transforms how we live and act. Moving from an easy, diluted, consumer-driven discipleship to radical, life-transformational discipleship will require *metanoia* and a paradigm shift.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to develop a theory regarding how church leaders can encourage their congregants to become fully devoted followers of Jesus. What factors influenced and have contributed to the non-rigorous form of easy believism as an accepted model of discipleship? What kind of paradigm shifts must Jesus followers be prepared to navigate in order to return to the death-to-self invitation of Jesus?

To begin, we must review the scriptural framework and invitation of Jesus to “come and follow me” found in Mark 1:14-20. In looking at this invitation, we will need to determine why it was so radical and how it differed from the other discipleship models of the time. When Jesus invited people to follow, he was doing more than simply saying come with me. He was inviting followers to die to self and enter into a union with him that involved suffering.

A key element in this death-to-self journey will be repentance. A deep dive into what is meant by repentance will serve to set the trajectory for what it means to be a radical Jesus follower. Hirsch (2016) writes extensively on this idea of repentance and says that

the very word for ‘repentance’ in the New Testament (*metanoia*) requires a paradigm shift (and change of nous; lit. mind-set/rationality) and a reversal of direction. But repentance is not a dirty word; rather, it is a huge gift from God to his people, without which we would be irretrievably lost (p. xxvii).

Hirsch goes on to say that because we, as believers, have the indwelling Holy Spirit, he gives us the power and strength to change. The Holy Spirit has been given as our advocate and teacher. He is the one who leads us into all truth and the one who brings conviction of sin and the courage to continue on the journey of transformation.

What has happened in the past two thousand millennia to move the church from viewing repentance as a gift from God to something that is dirty, awkward and rarely discussed? It



appears that initial conversion experiences invite new believers to repent of their sins, but repentance must also be an ongoing experience if transformation is to take place. Repentance involves a continual turning from anything that detracts from us Jesus.

Only after an understanding of repentance and how it is a critical kingdom formational concept can we move on to delving into how Jesus left the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth and equips disciples to live into the fullness of their gifts within the context of the Church. Knowing who we are in Christ, and how he has gifted each one for the building up of his body, the Church, can free us to live fully as equipped disciples. This, in turn, leads to missional multiplication in which disciples of Jesus make disciples who make disciples.

### **Importance of the Study**

This study will delve into these and other challenging questions on a quest to identify current trends and determine potential paths in an attempt to offer alternative and creative approaches to discipleship in a postmodern context. To do so will require calling forth all the gifts of the Spirit and the mDNA (“m” refers to missional) that may be lying latent and untended in the hearts of Jesus followers. Although I write from within and for an Anabaptist context, the implications of this study could be for the Church at large while acknowledging that there will be contextual and cultural differences and that the theories presented will need to be contextualized.

Why does this matter? Numerous books and studies have already been done in the area of discipleship. What is new and different about this particular study? I am seeking to bring together a Jesus-centered, Anabaptist perspective, kingdom approach to discipleship. Living in a 21st century Western culture that is deeply spiritual but not necessarily Holy Spirit-filled and mission motivated may offer opportunities for fresh approaches to living as disciples of

Jesus. Hirsch (2016) believes that “without at least five-fold forms of ministry and leadership, genuine missional movement will not happen” (p.189).

Over the past centuries, it appears that some of the Anabaptist congregations in the Western world seem to have focused on the gifts of shepherding and teaching to the neglect of the apostolic and prophetic voices, thus weakening the missional movement of the Church. Several factors seem to have contributed to this weakening of fully equipped disciples including Christendom and the emphasis on the conversion of the masses as well as the Enlightenment with its emphasis on rationalism. Both of these factors will be reviewed in greater depth in another chapter.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Discipleship, formation, spiritual gifts, missional --- these and other terms are widely accepted ways of talking about Christianity. This study seeks to bring together these familiar terms along with a renewed focus on repentance and the fullness of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit within a Jesus-centered kingdom approach to radical discipleship.

The main context for this study will be the Anabaptist community of LMC, a conference of over 240 congregations, spread throughout fourteen states and five countries and at least twelve worship languages. A portion of the study will take a look at the discipleship impulse within the broader Anabaptist community. Anabaptists have a long history of radically rooted discipleship and an understanding of the value of education dating back to at least the sixteenth century.

The S.T.E.P. program (Study and Training for Effective Pastoral ministry – STEP) will offer some context for leadership development within LMC. Several STEP alumni and

instructors will be invited to participate in the interview process to assess how effective this training program has been in developing and equipping disciples and raising up new leaders within LMC congregations and around the world.

Greer and Horst (2014), in their book *Mission Drift*, share a short list of questions that can be used for self-analysis. Several questions they suggest asking are, “Are we asking those we serve whether programs are effective and having impact and have we completed independent evaluation of program outcomes?” (p.131). Asking the right questions will help in determining future needs. It may be that we will need to change our scorecard, that is, what we measure as part of this metanoia journey.

Following the interviews with STEP alumni, instructors, and leaders from each LMC district, time will be taken to identify trends, summarize the data and offer potential theories of ways to strengthen and develop maturing disciples within the Anabaptist context with the hope that this work will be of benefit to the Church as a whole.

Another portion of this study will be to ascertain blockages to radical discipleship and to project future possibilities for new ways of being and doing Church in today’s postmodern context. In my reading and research, I have come to believe that much of the Western Church has become dependent on a consumer-driven model of discipleship. Although it has never been easy to be a true follower of Jesus, at times it has been popular to adhere to a water-down version of Christianity.

As I read the Gospels and Acts, I see a call to radical, costly discipleship which includes suffering, death to self, setting aside personal agendas and comforts and possibly even institutional structures. I see a need for the Church to become more fluid, nimble and Holy Spirit sensitive. In many areas, the Church in the Global South has flourished under intense persecution, famine, violence and suffering. In several recent conversations with Ethiopian

pastors engaged with the LMC STEP program, they told stories of coming to faith in Christ in the underground church. Following their conversion, they were baptized in secret in a bathtub because it was not safe to hold open baptismal services. These brothers understand the invitation to costly discipleship.

In embarking on this dissertation journey, there is a personal sense of call, but also a deep longing for the Church to return to her first love, to dismantle idols, to do the things we did at first, to repent, embrace metanoia, to walk and talk with God in the garden of our daily lives.

### **Research Questions**

Several questions arise that will help to focus the research for this study. The first question relates to ways the church has approached the need to train leaders and equip disciples. What types of approaches have been used and how well have they succeeded in making disciples of Jesus who make disciples who make disciples? Integrated with these questions are questions related to whether or not we still live and act like Jesus is Lord or is Caesar lord? Has the Church lost its first love? Where do our paradigms need to shift and what idols must be toppled for the Church to regain her imagination, first love and missional impulse? These and other questions will help to lay the foundation for the research.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Anabaptist** – The early Anabaptists were part of the Protestant Reformation but became known as radical reformers for their understanding of how to read and interpret scripture. A secondary distinctive tenet is adult or believer's baptism; the belief that only those who have confessed Jesus as Lord should be baptized.

**Data Dashboard** – A survey tool used to measure a number of variables and ascertain their effectiveness. LMC uses the data dashboard tool to determine the number of annual baptisms, track outreach and mission impulses, and gain general feedback from member congregations. The survey information is tracked over a period of time to determine the health and vitality of congregations.

**Deconstruction** – May involve taking apart or dismantling belief systems or systemic ways of acting in order to examine their value or truthfulness in order to allow new growth to emerge.

**Discipleship** – Beginning definition: Followers of Jesus who obey and then pass on to others what they are learning from Jesus. These followers in turn pass on to others the teachings of Jesus.

**Jesus** – Jesus is the Living Word who became flesh who was born of the virgin Mary, lived, suffered, was crucified for the sins of the world and whom God the Father raised to life after three days. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he gave the gift of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity who will abide with believers forever.

**Missional** – Living incarnation; God is a missional God, and he invites all who follow him to join his mission of salvation and restoration for all of creation.

**Postmodern** - An intellectual system of beliefs that has a general distrust of grand narratives and includes the idea that there are no universal truths.

**Spiritual Direction** – Spiritual direction is usually a one-on-one meeting in which the director listens deeply to God and to the other person in order to attend to what the Spirit is saying. The spiritual director journeys with the directee as they move toward spiritual maturity. In the Anabaptist tradition, Spiritual Director, Doreen Miller in her website offers the following

definition, “Spiritual direction is helping another person fulfill their desire to really know our triune God” (<https://www.eyesarentenough.com/2018/08/04/so-what-is-spiritual-direction/>, accessed December 2021).

**Spiritual Formation** – This refers to the process in which a disciple of Jesus is conformed and transformed into His image. The Holy Spirit is the teacher, guide and one who leads the disciple into all Truth.

**Spiritual Practices** – Tools that assist the user in developing intimacy with Jesus. These tools are best practiced over a longer period of time to maximize effectiveness, deepen and strengthen one's walk as a disciple. These tools may also be called spiritual disciplines or prayer practices because when using these tools, the disciple enters into a season in which they enter into a regular regimen in order to develop greater maturity and intimacy as a disciple.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

A primary assumption in this study is that some of the Anabaptist discipleship models are weak and in need of reform. While I attempt to offer support for this assumption, there are some limitations on how to document internal transformation. While we know that internal transformation can lead to an external change of behavior or way of acting, there remains an element of subjectivity in knowing how to qualitatively measure this type of change.

A second assumption is that we speak from our own context and experience which in a sense, may preclude us from engaging in cultures or contexts outside of our tradition. This is a limitation as well in that I choose to stay within the Anabaptist context and not interview those from other denominations. In addition, I have limited my research related to Anabaptist education and discipleship models to a few key Anabaptist theologians and historians.

## **Summary Statement**

In embarking on this journey, I do not have an end product or result in mind. My sense is that the final product, platform or framework will emerge from the study and research. For that reason, I plan to use the Grounded Theory approach, a social science research method. This method allows for a theory to emerge organically out of the collected data.

The research will include definitions of commonly used terms, scripture and literature review of key Anabaptist historians. As part of this research, I will offer a broad overview of church history, noticing the factors that contributed to where the church is today. I will draw from the work and writings of sociologist Conrad Kanagy, Alan Kreider, Donald Kraybill and others who have written extensively on LMC congregational life and ministry both locally and globally. In addition, I will refer to Anabaptist and other theologians and writers who have contributed to the literature in the area of missional church leadership development.

Following the research phase, I will summarize the data, identify trends and propose potential theory(ies) for training and equipping disciple-making leaders who will carry God's mission into the next generation.

## **Literature Review**

### **Abstract**

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. Then Jesus told them this parable...” (Luke 15:1, 3 NIV). As Jesus talked, the listeners were immediately drawn into the story that he was telling because he talked about issues to which they could readily relate. Stories pull people in. They touch hearts and emotions. Stories help people to connect, to engage their senses, deepen their understanding and to offer a new perspective.

The purpose of this chapter is to invite you to enter into the story of church history, beginning with the children of Israel to Jesus and the early church. As part of the review, we touch on ways that Christendom and the Reformation have influenced and shaped the church, especially paying attention to the focus on discipleship. We consider why it is necessary to understand church history and the ways history has shaped leadership development.

Following the story line, we move from the broader historical narrative to a more local focus, concluding with a look at ways that education and spiritual formation have shaped discipleship within LMC (Lancaster Mennonite Conference), an Anabaptist fellowship of churches. The STEP (Study and Training for Effective Pastoral ministry) program is offered as one example of a discipleship training program within the LMC context. Having a historical context for the church and an awareness of the factors that have shaped Christianity offers a framework for understanding the current contextual factors and challenges facing the 21<sup>st</sup> church.

Key to the discipleship journey and woven throughout the following narrative is the fact that Jesus is Lord, God is relational and God’s mission must be the mission of the church.



## **The Story of God on Mission in Biblical and Church History**

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:10 NIV). What does it mean to be God’s people? The God on mission reached down into human history and invited his created people to be part of his story. “The early church understood itself to be the holy people of God’s own possession, a people whose pattern of life differed essentially from that of the rest of the world” (Driver, 1997, p. 35). The call to be a people set apart for a Holy God is rooted in the biblical narrative. In Genesis 12, God invited Abram to leave and go to a new land. He promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation and that all nations would be blessed through him.

The sovereignty of Almighty God is evident throughout the biblical metanarrative of God setting aside for himself a people. These people, while often unfaithful, were called to demonstrate to the rest of the world the extravagant mercy and grace of a loving God. Unlike the gods of the other nations who were vindictive, hard to please, and were made in the image of man, this God, the Creator of all, eagerly desires to be in relationship with his people.

The story of Abraham and his three heavenly visitors in Genesis 18, demonstrates God’s invitation to relationship. This story in Genesis 18 is the only time in the Old Testament where it is written that God eats with a human. In this passage, Abraham has a meal prepared for his guests, he serves them, he watches as they eat, then he walks with God and talks with him. Here, God takes the initiative to invite Abraham into a relationship, into a dialogue about the fate of

cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. “The intimate relationship between Abraham and God is, first and foremost, because God knows Abraham, not the other way around. So then, the reciprocal ‘knowing’ between God and Abraham had a missional purpose: God’s commitment to bless humanity” (C. Wright, 2007, p. 105-106). God was inviting Abraham to grieve and to intercede on behalf of the inhabitants of those cities who were doomed to destruction. Christopher Wright (2007) goes on to note that “knowing God is never an end in itself but must be pursued within the context of serving the mission of God in bringing blessing to the nations. Knowing God is missional, not merely devotional” (p. 107). The devotional aspect can jumpstart the relationship but the missional aspect must flow from the devotional relationship.

Moses also had a unique relationship with God. In Exodus 33:11, we read that God spoke with Moses as with a friend. And a bit later in chapter 34, we learn that after spending time in the tent of meeting, Moses’s face glowed so greatly that he put a veil over his face so the Israelites would not be afraid to come hear him. (Exodus 34:29-35 NIV).

In the case of both Abraham and Moses, “knowing God involved being taken into God’s confidence as regards to God’s plan and purposes. There is a privilege and responsibility in seeking to interpret the times in light of the known word and will of God and with the mind of Christ, through his Spirit” (C. Wright, 2007, p. 131). Although the Spirit had not yet been given to Abraham and Moses, they were known by and knew God in an intimate way and understood his will for their lives and the lives of those around them.

In Exodus 34:6-7, we read that God proclaimed his name to Moses as,

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation (NIV).

This narrative of a God who is slow to anger, longsuffering, and not willing that any should perish, is woven throughout the fabric of history. The prophet Jeremiah wrote on this theme in chapter 31, when he prophesied:

In those days people will no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge. “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:29-34 NIV).

Jeremiah foresaw the new covenant in which God's laws would be written on hearts rather than on tablets of stone. What a glorious promise that he is our God, and we are his people!

The metanarrative of a God who is merciful but just, everywhere present but not seen with human eyes, compassionate and slow to anger, not willing that any should perish, is the narrative of the countercultural upside-down kingdom where the poor in spirit inherit the kingdom, the lame walk, the blind see and first are last. This proclamation of a kingdom of role reversals can be seen in the Old and the New Testament. In Mary's song of exaltation, we read that for some, their world will be turned upside-down. Mary sings of one who "has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:49-53, NIV). The road to intimacy with God and kingdom living is not for the faint of heart. "The kingdom points us not to the place of God but to the act of God. It is his ruling activity. The kingdom is present whenever women and men submit themselves to God's reign in their life" (Kraybill, 1978, p. 25), as seen in the lives of Abraham, Moses and Mary. Therefore, the Old and New Testaments agree that knowing God is possible and to be desired. God is relational and wants to be known and to reveal his will and plans to his children.

As we delve into a brief look at church history, we can be assured that no matter what comes against the Church, God will prevail. The victory has been won and Jesus is triumphant. From the inauspicious beginning of the church in the book of Acts, which we will look at in

greater depth later, to the third spaces such as theaters, bars and strip malls where congregations meet today, the Church has endured, continuing to carry out the mission of God for his world.

In his book *Images of the Church in Mission*, author John Driver (1997) believes that Israel's history as God's chosen people reveals an ebb and flow. From the prophetic voices who proclaimed God's love and called Israel to a higher standard to the priests who offered sacrifices and led in worship, to Israel's desire to be like the other nations and have a visible king, their understanding as

God's contrast-society and the idea of being God's sign among the nations undoubtedly faded gradually, especially from about the middle of the second century onward. With the advent of the monarchy, this essential identity of the people of God tended to become confused with national political structures in Israel (pp. 36-37).

Driver (1997) believes that when King David "consolidated political power in Israel and organized the 'religious' aspects of Israel's life in the interests of the common welfare .... he anticipated Constantine" (p. 37). Continuing to build on Driver's comments, Brueggemann notes "by the time of Solomon in approximately 962 B.C.E. (after forty years of shrewd and ambiguous leadership from David) there was a radical shift in the foundation of Israel's life and faith" (Brueggemann, 2018, p. 23).

The shift from God as King to Israel wanting to be like the other nations and asking for an earthly king continued to move the Israelites further away from the Mosaic laws governing life and community. By the time of Solomon, there was continued movement toward becoming

more like the surrounding nations by attaining a harem for the purposes of strengthening political alliances, building an army and levying taxes to maintain the current bureaucracy. These and other similar changes set the stage for the changes Constantine would initiate, including how the Bible was read and by whom it was read. The Church, as embodied in Israel, had begun to adopt the cultural norms of surrounding society thus lessening their missional impact. As recorded throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites intermarried with the surrounding nations, adopting their gods, customs and worship. Repeatedly, God sent his prophets to warn and call the Israelites back to him.

Probably no book in the Old Testament portrays more vividly the compassionate love of Almighty God than the books of Song of Songs and Hosea. Both books demonstrate a God who woos his bride, loves her tenderly and cares for her even in the midst of her failure to return his love. The prophet Hosea portrays the constancy of God's love and the ebb and flow of Israel's adultery with the surrounding nations. Finally, the Old Testament closes with 400 years of silence, with the faithful waiting and longing for the coming of the Messiah.

As the Old Testament closed with a period of silence, church history continued its onward march. In turning our attention toward Christendom, we note that religion played an authoritative role in life, politics and church. Stuart Williams (2000) in his article on *Anabaptist Hermeneutics*, observes that "Christendom presuppositions have influenced every aspect of the life of the churches, including hermeneutics" (p.1). With politics playing a key role in church life, "the Church, quite naturally began to adjust its hermeneutic to reflect the new status quo" (Williams, 2000, p. 1), in which both Church and state are the beneficiaries of the emerging political and hierarchical structure.

However, with the emergence of the Enlightenment period in the 18th century, religion began to be viewed with suspicion and dismissed as unnecessary and irrelevant. The very structure of religion that was so key in Christendom began to crumble. As Christendom developed, it would appear that those in power gave into the same temptation that Jesus faced when in the wilderness with Satan. In the third temptation of Jesus, Satan offered Jesus the authority over all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would bow to him. Jesus did not give in, but with the political power and military coercion used to force people into the kingdom, some in Christendom bowed to this temptation. And what the age of Enlightenment and modernity did not dismantle of the faith, the moral and political crises in the West in the 20th century did.

In continuing to reflect on church history, we can conclude that there were mitigating factors which contributed to the Church's failure to identify fully with the mission of God. It should be noted that according to Kreider, there is "more than one variety of Christendom" (Kreider, 1999, p. 91), but all share similar traits. Shared characteristics include common beliefs such as lack of toleration for heresy, religious instruction, common rituals, symbols and art to help portray Christian stories. In addition, there was a sense of common belonging, which included recruiting others, including infants, to the cause, an all-encompassing church, professional clergy and limited focus on mission and outreach. Christendom also enforced common behaviors and attempted to legislate Christian morals. These behaviors and morals were enforced with peer and civil coercion. This coercion was never referred to as persecution, but there could be dire consequences if one failed to adhere to the prescribed behavior (Kreider, 1999, pp. 91-98). As the attempt to legislate behavior continued, "the church gradually came to institutionalize its authority in the form of episcopacy, creed, and canon. To be God's people now was coming to mean submission to the bishop of Rome" (Driver, 1997, p. 37). In short order,

the church moved from being persecuted to being the persecutor for those who refused to convert.

What happens when the external coercion and incentives to be a Christian are taken away? In some areas, elements of Christendom continued to thrive. But “in many Western societies, the peeling away has been gradual, taking place layer by layer over many centuries, in revulsion at bloody religious wars between Christian powers, and under pressure from both the Enlightenment and Christian nonconformist bodies” (Kreider, 1999, p. 98). Although the remnants of Christendom have faded, Western culture continues to be influenced by its art, music, liturgy, intellectualism, belief systems and the professionalization of the clergy. Frost & Hirsch (2003) in their book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, believe that “the Christendom-mode of church has framed us and set us up for failure. Christendom is always associated with buildings, Sundays and clergy! Yet the New Testament church had none of these” (p. 193). What had happened to living under the Lordship of Christ?

For centuries, the Christendom-mode was a force to be reckoned with. However, as the strength of Christendom began to wane, it should be noted that many of the teachings of the early church had been watered down over the course of time. The concept of Jesus as Lord of all life had shifted to more of a domesticated view of Jesus as a remote king. “The increasing distance between Jesus’ lifestyle and that of church leaders necessitated a marginalization of the humanity of Jesus. Consequently, in the fourth century, Jesus was recast as a celestial figure, his divinity was emphasized and the dangerous memory of the Nazarene was allowed to fade” (Williams, 2000, p. 1). Augustine, among others of his era, was an influential theologian who also lived in the fourth century. He was one who tended to teach “more on Christ’s death than on his life”



(Becker, 2017, p. 17), a concept that was important but left out the broader Christological view that included the resurrection, Pentecost, and living out the mission of God. Many writings from the fourth century demonstrate the abandonment of this Christocentric biblical hermeneutic. Scripture was interpreted in ways that benefitted both the Church and the State.

During the Middle Ages, morality continued to decline as the church structures that supported Christendom, “soon recognised that it was impractical to require the whole population to accept New Testament ethics, so Old Testament norms were adopted for all except the monastic orders” (Williams, 2000, p.1). Palmer Becker, in his book *Anabaptist Essentials*, agrees that “true discipleship could still be found in the monastic movement” (Becker, 2017, p. 18), but Christendom’s influence was still a force to be reckoned with. “Between 1200 and 1550 CE, a number of concerned leaders began to realize there were serious inadequacies in their practice of Christian faith” (Becker, 2017, p. 18). Among these leaders were Martin Luther, a German monk, Ulrich Zwingli, A Swiss pastor, and John Calvin, a French theologian. With the act of nailing Luther’s list of ninety-five theses (a list of offenses against the church) to a church door in Germany, the Protestant Reformation was born. There was, of course, a concomitant Catholic reformation that sought some of these same objectives from within the Church. Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Erasmus, and John of the Cross are some of those who restored a passion for Jesus at the core of the practice of the faith in the 16th century. These and other like-minded leaders “sought to restore the church to its original core values and purposes as described in the Scriptures. They separated themselves from the powers, traditions and rituals of the church’s hierarchy in Rome” (Becker, 2017, p. 19), even while continuing to create their own traditions and rituals on a smaller scale. But the reform had begun.

At the height of the Reformation, several of Zwingli’s followers met for Bible study and prayer. Other similar groups began meeting with the intent to return to the foundational beliefs of

the early church, declaring Jesus is Lord. As they studied the scripture, they came to the conclusion that only adults who confess Jesus as Lord and commit to following him daily should be baptized. In addition, these early reformers “came to realize that reforming the state church system was inadequate and that forming believers’ churches was essential. They comprehensively rejected Christendom and its symbols” (Williams, 2000, p. 2). Thus began the Radical Reformation from which the Anabaptists (re-baptizers) came. “These early Anabaptists broke completely with the concepts of Christendom held by both Catholic and Protestant leaders and institutions” (Becker, 2017, p.21), with a desire to return to the simplicity of the gospel message as found in the New Testament. Their desire was to “apply New Testament standards to all Christians, arguing that Jesus was the norm for ethics as well as salvation” (Williams, 2000, p.2). Bender (1944) concurs with this theme when he writes that “the Anabaptists were concerned most of all about ‘a true Christian life’, that is, a life patterned after the teaching and example of Christ” (p.16). This was a huge countercultural shift that encompassed every aspect of life, thought and practice. These changes took time to implement and there was much work to be done to recapture a Christocentric hermeneutic. Augsburger (2000) emphasized reconciliation as key to recapturing this Christocentric hermeneutic. He would argue that,

Through reconciliation we experience God’s call upon our lives. In the psychological depths of response and repentance, we find ourselves giving up self-centeredness to become God-centered. Christianity had various forms in the 16<sup>th</sup> c: sacramental, theological, and existential; among them, only the Radical Reformation emphasized actually living out reconciled and reconciling relationships (pp. 21, 22).

While there are differences of opinion among Anabaptists in the area of hermeneutics, most agree that “the centrality of Jesus in scripture was foundational for Anabaptist hermeneutics

and theology” (Williams, 2000, p. 4). Anabaptists choose to apply New Testament standards to all areas of life and practice. This is a significant shift from the prevailing Christendom hermeneutic which focused primarily on the Old Testament structures for church life. Williams (2000) goes on to say that

The demise of Christendom is unlikely to be sudden or total. Even when the official relationship between Church and state is dissolved, the Christendom mindset within the churches (and within society) will persist and many will seek a return to a supposedly more “Christian” society. What does need to be challenged, if not eradicated, is the distorting influence of the Christendom mindset on biblical interpretation (p. 8).

Continuing to be attentive to the trajectory of change, Wilder and Hendricks in their book *The Other Half of Church*, note that

the cultural ground around the church shifted. Philosophical developments from the Enlightenment altered the way we looked at ourselves as humans. The mind was elevated to be the most important part of our humanity. Christianity followed Enlightenment culture and slowly became focused on correct thinking. In this new world, it has become more important to be right than to be loving (Wilder & Hendricks, 2020, p. 45).

However, simply thinking correctly does not automatically lead to correct behavior. Right thinking must move from head to heart in order to transform our actions. Often, this takes place best in the context of a community of other believers, the *ekklesia*. A key Anabaptist hermeneutic is the understanding of the congregational community “which was understood as both a charismatic community and a community of disciples” (Williams, 2000, p. 5). The Anabaptists emphasized the role of dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide the individual and the community in understanding scripture and maintaining gospel vitality.

Over the centuries, culture, persecution, divisions, and heresies continued to exact a toll on the church and “by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant Christianity was widely regarded as having lost its gospel vitality. Instead, it was crippled by ‘formalism’ in worship, daily life and doctrine” (Lewis, 2014, p. 40). One German theologian who saw this loss of vitality and responded to the widespread nominalism was Philipp Jakob Spener. In his response in which he advocated for church reform within the Protestant context, he urged the church to return to:

- 1 ) intensive Bible study; 2) recovery of the priesthood of all believers, thus emphasizing the ministry of the laity; 3) relating Christian faith to daily life and 4) seeking to win unbelievers to faith through compassion and positive example rather than by coercion (Lewis, 2014, pp. 40-41).

This was a call to return to the foundations of the early church because in part, the church was no longer functioning as the *ekklesia*, but rather, was being influenced by the society. It should be noted that “in each generation the theological impulse of evangelicalism has had to be clarified and applied to the issues confronting Christian conscience” (Lewis, 2014, pp. 33-34). This clarification should not change the mission, however, but rather the methods of communication may need to change to keep pace with the changing culture. Movement and mission must remain at the forefront.

Further reflection on the sweeping changes taking place within the church reveals that “the Industrial Revolution intensified the problem by breaking down the relational bonds that held families and communities together” (Wilder & Hendricks, 2020, p. 46). Several generations of family members no longer live in close proximity to one another, thus providing support, encouragement and strong family ties. In today’s Western culture, often both parents work outside the home in order to sustain their lifestyle, thus leaving the children in daycare or

home alone. The increasing amount of time that is spent in front of a screen is quickly replacing face-to-face interactions. Practices that encourage right and left-brain activities are diminishing. These, as well as other cultural factors, contribute to the need for a return to a biblical model of *ekklesia*.

The impact of two world wars in less than three decades cannot be underestimated. “The decades before 1914 had been a time of expansiveness and optimism, with the promise of the Enlightenment apparently on the verge of fruition” (T. Greer, 1972, p. 440). However, the anticipated fruition was not to be. “Technology had created forces that were dissolving the foundations of liberalism, and imperialism had opened wounds, both in Europe and overseas, that continued to fester” (T. Greer, 1972, p. 440). Technology, scientific advances, liberal institutions, and rational thinking had contributed to an elevated view of the human person and a missional focus had been left in the dust. At the turn of the nineteenth century, “each nation viewed itself as the chosen instrument of God; its founding fathers and heroes were the apostles and martyrs; its political charters were revered as holy texts” (T. Greer, 1972, p. 441). As many nations strengthened their armed forces which came to represent the “principal embodiment of its sovereign spirit and honor” (T. Greer, 1972, p. 441), competition between nations increased, each wanting to be the strongest and most powerful. The resulting world wars and ensuing Great Depression had long lasting consequences. In addition to the catastrophic loss of life and economic costs, world positions had been shaken and rearranged. Perry (1993) believes that the “Great War profoundly altered the course of Western civilization, deepening the spiritual crisis that had produced it. Western civilization had entered an age of violence, anxiety, and doubt that still persists” (p. 498). Despite the enormous contributions of Western society, peace was fragile,

vitality seemed to be waning and people were disillusioned.

The war produced a generation of young people who had reached their maturity in combat. Violence had become a way of life for millions of soldiers hardened by battle and for millions of civilians aroused by four years of propaganda (Perry, 1993, p. 499).

Amid the lingering aftereffects of war and depression, religious revivals began springing up around the United States. Marsden (2014) notes that “between 1950 and 1960, church affiliation jumped an amazing 14 percent, going from 55 percent of the total population to 69 percent” (p. 98). However, “unlike earlier American awakenings, this one was not primarily a renewal of Protestantism but a ‘maturing national religion’. And this national religion, which was shared even by many of the unchurched, was strikingly vague” (Marsden, 2014, p. 111). The faith that emerged for some was a type of ‘self-help’ mentality, with little to no emphasis on mission. “Historical change is, of course, driven by a host of factors, some of which are beyond anyone’s control” (Marsden, 2014, p. 129).

Consequently, more change is on the horizon for the 21st century. With the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic continuing to create challenges for churches, science, technology, and a host of other related factors, change is inevitable. With confidence, we can entrust our lives to the one who changes not but is the “same yesterday, today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8 NIV). Jesus remains the head and source of the church and now is the time for the church to stand firm and fulfill its God given mission.

## God's Mission has a Church

In the book of Acts, the Church was referred to as the *ekklesia*, meaning a called out assembly or gathering of people. The term was used within Greek and Roman culture to refer to a local assembly of people who gathered, often for civic reasons. However, the early church used the term *ekklesia* to refer to a local group of believers. As Van Gelder in his book *The Missional Church in Context* notes, “of the 114 occurrences of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, through context or the use of the plural, the vast majority of usages indicate that the term refers to a local community of believers” (Van Gelder, 2007, p. 103). This group of gathered believers met for worship and encouragement, but they also met to influence their culture and society by their lifestyle in word and in deed. Facing persecution, the church scattered, thus enlarging the scope and spread of the Gospel message, which is the intent of God's mission for the world he created and loves.

The mission of God for the world he created is rooted in his intention for complete healing and restoration of all aspects of his world. It is his initiative to redeem. Since mission is at the heart of who God is, mission cannot simply be relegated as another activity or program of the church.

Darrell Guder in his book, *Missional Church*, says that with the term *missional* we emphasize the essential nature and vocation of the church as God's called and sent people. A missional ecclesiology is biblical, historical, contextual and eschatological. A missional ecclesiology can be practiced, that is, translated into practice (Guder, 1998, pp. 11-12).

This practical mission is rooted in God's very nature. It is for all peoples at all times and will continue until the second coming of Christ. The mission must be lived out by believers everywhere

in every context because the Church is a body of sent people who follow and live out the Father's mission for his world. The mission of redemption is for all aspects of creation; nothing is excluded. Frost & Hirsch, (2003), note that "the lesson is that the church ought to remain in mission for God's sake, but also for its own sake" (p. 194).

Jesus came to represent the missional heart of God to the world. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us that "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3 NIV). And Jesus Himself said to his disciple Philip,

Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work (John 14:9,10 NIV).

And again, the Apostle John writes that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1 NIV). To see Jesus is to see God. As Jesus ministered on earth, he revealed the heart of God through his teaching and healing, through his authority over demons and the natural elements. Everything Jesus did and said was to demonstrate the character and nature of God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit act in one accord for one purpose.

Jesus invites his disciples to follow him as he followed and obeyed God. Discipleship.org defines a disciple as one "someone who is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus and is committed to the mission of Jesus" (Discipleship.org, 2022). In both Greek and Hebrew, the root word for disciple means student or learner, an apprentice, "one who learns in active fellowship. Discipleship is a relationship before it is a task, a 'who' before a 'what'" (Edwards,



2002, pp.110-111). Jesus invited his first followers to be in relationship with him. He was not inviting them to a program, but rather to a relationship. Jesus told his disciples, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15 NIV). This is not a master/slave relationship but an invitation to a new way of being, a deeper union. Jesus’s prayer in John 17 makes this clear when he prays “that all of them may be *one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also *be in us* so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21 NIV, *emphasis is researcher’s*). When we are *in* Christ, we are united in his mission, his purpose, his will and his way.

In his commentary on the book of Mark, James Edwards (2002) notes that when Jesus called to him those he wanted,

the Greek is more emphatic; the sense is that he *summoned* those whom he *willed*. Jesus determines the call. Disciples do not decide to follow Jesus and do him a favor in so doing; rather his call supersedes their wills, summoning one who does not intend to follow and debarring one who would (p. 111).

The call to follow Jesus is a sovereign call. It is not about what the disciple can do for Jesus, but the transformation that takes place within the disciple who humbly follows Jesus as Lord.

The invitation of Jesus to his disciples was vastly different from other disciples of that day. “The rabbi’s (of Jesus day) did not call their disciples but were chosen by them because they saw their teachers as guides to following the Torah” (Stein, 2008, p. 169). When Jesus called the twelve, he was inviting them to be with him, not to follow the Torah. They were called to a relationship with Jesus, not to go to a place. Mark’s use of the word *call* in chapter 3, verse 13 is the Greek word *proskaleitai*, which “has the sense of ‘selecting’ or ‘choosing’” (Stein, 2008, p.

168). It is Jesus who is making the selection, not the other way around. There is not the sense of what the disciples could make of themselves by becoming his disciples, but rather, what Jesus could make of them; how he would call out their gifts and empower them with his authority to do greater works in the name of his Father. This is the sense of being chosen to be on a mission that will transform not only the disciples, but also their world.

And that mission includes reconciliation. Augsburger (2000) believes that reconciliation is, in my understanding of biblical teaching, the central aspect of God's overarching covenant of grace. It spans both Testaments as the unifying theme and finds its full expression in Christ. As I study history, I see reconciliation as a central motif in the sixteenth-century experiential faith of the Anabaptists (p. 21).

The theme of reconciliation permeates both the Old and New Testament, finding ultimate fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. "The Radical Reformers (Anabaptists) focused more on the relational aspects of being 'in Christ.' The in-Christ approach to interpretation calls us from a legalistic stance some see in the OT to the relational stance highlighted in the NT" (Augsburger, 2000, p. 23). As Paul writes in Corinthians,

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19, 20 NIV).

Jesus invited his disciples to be with him, to journey with him, to watch and to practice. He was not calling them because he was lonely and wanted companionship on his travels. He was inviting them so he could model what he was going to ask them to do. They were to be a witness to what he did and spoke. Some of the disciples, (both men and women), traveled in community with Jesus.

Where he went, they went. They were there when he taught the crowds and when he healed the sick. They watched as he cast out demons and they often saw him praying to his Father.

As a sending God, he commissions his disciples as sent ones. In order to be sent, they must first *be with* him. The Gospel writer Mark tells us that Jesus appointed twelve that they might *be with* him (Mark 3:14 NIV). Doing must follow being. “A person who practices *being before doing* operates from a place of emotional and spiritual fullness, deeply aware of themselves, others and God. As a result, their *being with* God is sufficient to sustain their *doing for God*” (Scazzaro, 2021, p. 41). To *be with* another means spending time in their presence, being present with perhaps no agenda other than being together. Being present with another may seem inactive or unproductive, but when we are fully present with another, we are able to enter in, empathize with and we begin to understand their heart and what motivates them to action. Only by being fully present with Jesus were the disciples able to begin to understand and grasp the depth of relationship to which he was inviting them.

The task of being with Jesus is one that is harder than it might first appear. The twelve will have to learn that there is a difference between hanging around Jesus and truly being *with* him. The latter means that they must follow wherever he leads and share the toil of the ministry, the harassment of the crowds and the same bitter draught of suffering (Garland, 1996, p. 129).

There is a difference between knowing about Jesus but not truly *knowing* him in an intimate way. Kevin Vanhoozer notes that “the goal of discipleship is not being per se, but rather, *being-in-Christ*” (Vanhoozer, 2014, p. 40). A true follower of Christ will act out of their love relationship with him, not for personal gain or advancement. Augsburg (1964) likens this *being-in-Christ* to a marriage relationship when he writes,

To be ‘in Christ’ is a relationship as real as that involved in matrimony. As marriage means the radical reorientation of the individual’s life to share fully with another, just so being ‘in Christ’ is a spiritual reorientation of one’s whole life (pp. 13-14).

In addition to being *with* Jesus, the disciples were also sent to *do*. Whether they were aware of it or not, they were apprenticing with Jesus during his three years on earth. In Luke 10:1, Jesus sent his disciples out two by two to all the places he was intending to visit. He gave them instructions and authority to heal the sick, preach the good news and cast out demons. Upon their return, this was the message they shared:

Lord, even the demons obey us when we use your name! “Yes,” he told them, “I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning! The Apostle John records Jesus as saying to the disciples, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (John 14:12-14 NIV).

His plan from the beginning had been for the disciples to *be* and to *do* in his name, both of which flow from a love relationship with the Lord.

In stark contrast to a pampered Western society in pursuit of happiness, Jesus’s beginnings were inauspicious. He was born in a stable to a poor family. He fled to Egypt as a fugitive and then grew up in the nowheresville town of Nazareth. His disciples were not chosen from the religious leaders of his day. In fact, the first disciples were a motley crew, who, counter to the traditions of the day, included women. They boasted no special education, no unique skills, and no great wealth to support their endeavors. Matthew was a tax collector, hated by his own countrymen. Simon was a part of the Zealot nationalist group who were plotting to overthrow

their country from Roman oppression. Several disciples fished for their living, Thomas doubted him, and Judas Iscariot ultimately betrayed him. These were ordinary men and women.

Even Peter, who was generally bold and ready for action, denied Jesus. But in John chapter 21, we find Jesus having a conversation with Peter and Jesus' main question to Peter is about his love for Jesus. Jesus does not seem concerned about Peter's theology, his training or lack of, his depth of knowledge or even what spiritual gift he possesses, although these are all important. The primary concern is whether or not Peter loves Jesus, because Jesus loves him. N.T. Wright (2008) says of this encounter,

there are many things going on simultaneously here, but at the center is the challenge to a new way of life, a new forgiveness, a new fruitfulness, a new following of Jesus, which will be wider and more dangerous than what has gone before (p. 241).

Jesus is preparing Peter to embark on a new journey, fishing for people rather than for fish. Peter's love for Jesus has developed over the course of the past three years of his life as he has spent time with Jesus and being loved by Jesus. Vanhoozer (2014) comments that "*knowing about* is one thing; *personal commitment or trust* in another person is quite another. Right knowledge (orthodoxy) is ultimately hollow if it is not accompanied by right love" (p. 111). Love flowing from an intimate relationship is the key to right living (orthopraxy).

There were some who followed Jesus who understood this kind of love. In Matthew's gospel, we are treated to the story of a woman who appeared during a dinner party at the home of Simon the Leper. "While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table" (Matthew 26:6,7 NIV). As we follow the storyline, we read that those

present who saw this demonstration of love, were completely annoyed with the woman for wasting the expensive perfume on Jesus. However, Jesus saw her action differently. He commended the woman for the beautiful thing she did to him and said that “wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (Matthew 26:13 NIV).

How did this woman get it so right? What caused her to risk her reputation and to pour out a costly perfume worth year’s wages on Jesus’s head? Somewhere on her journey, she had experienced the extravagant love of Jesus and had been forever changed. The pouring out of the expensive perfume was a demonstration of her deep love for Jesus. Not until after Pentecost do we see others who are willing to give all in the same way that this woman, whom the Apostle John identifies as Mary, did. This incredible story of a woman who gave her best happened prior to the crucifixion, prior to the resurrection and prior to Pentecost and somehow, centuries later, the story of her extravagant love is still being told.

Not everyone who followed Jesus, responded to his love in the same way that Mary did. The journey to which Jesus invited his followers was not to win a popularity contest. His message antagonized the religious leaders, puzzled the crowds, and even caused some of his early followers to turn away. Jesus mingled with the sick, the lepers, and the sinners of that day. Even his family doubted him. His ministry was mostly in small towns to everyday people. The writer of the book of Philippians reminds us that he “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of servant” (Philippians 2:7 NIV). He was gentle, humble in heart and obedient even to the cross.

Jesus knew that if his message was to get out and bear fruit, it would have to be done by people. His message is written on the hearts and lives of his followers. It took great courage to follow Jesus. It was risky to leave one's livelihood. Jesus had no permanent home and no regular place to lay his head. He was either wildly popular or intensely hated. His message upset the religious systems of the day. The religious leaders often plotted against him and looked for opportunities to kill him because he was upsetting the religious hierarchy of the day.

However, Jesus consistently led his followers by example and out of his times of communion with the Father. He did and said what he saw the Father doing. His leadership flowed from his relationship with his Father. Jesus waited on his Father for timing, for what to say and how to say it; for who to heal and how to heal. He did not give in to hurry, worry and busyness as is the tendency of much of our world today. He told his followers that He is *the way*, and the truth and the life (John 14:6 NIV).

In his prophetic role, he challenged the prevailing religious culture repeatedly in his sermon on the mount in the Gospel of Matthew. As he taught the crowds he said, “you have heard ... but I say to you...” (Matthew 5:21, 22, 27, 28, 33, 34 NIV). Jesus was asking them to reimagine, to look at life with new eyes. Brueggmann (2018) says that “it is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one” (p. 40). Jesus was giving his hearers insight into the reality of what the Kingdom of God is like and inviting them to use their imagination to become part of that new reality. That new reality included crucifixion, death to self and unity with Christ. As the Apostle Paul writes with passion,

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me

(Galatians 2:20 NIV).

This identification with Christ is deeper than human relationships. In fact, in John 17, Jesus prayed “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21 NIV). What does it mean to be one, to have this kind of unity? Most commentators agree that love is the primary ingredient for unity. In his dated, but in-depth commentary on the Gospel of John, F. B. Meyer (1899) believes that “the Church of Rome, which has ever travestied in gross material forms the most spiritual conceptions of God, sought to prove herself the true Church by achieving a oneness of her own. It was an outward and visible oneness” (p. 174). The Church of Rome achieved a type of oneness based upon coercion, threat and persecution. However, the full text of Jesus’s prayer in John 17 reveals the depth of his love and desire for unity for all disciples. Jesus prayed, “so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23 NIV).

Jesus never coerced anyone into the kingdom, rather he lovingly lived the truth and loved others enough to allow them to decide for or against him.

Barclay (1975) in his commentary on the Gospel of John believes that Jesus was not praying for

A unity of administration or organization; it was not in any sense an ecclesiastical unity. It was a unity of personal relationship. It was a unity of love for which Jesus prayed, a unity in which men loved each other because they loved him, a unity based entirely on the relationship between heart and heart (p. 218).

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are united as one because of heart-to-heart love. So far, the world has not seen the full expression of this kind of love in the church, but



because Jesus prayed for it, his words will be fulfilled. “Real unity between all Christians would be a ‘supernatural fact which would require a supernatural explanation’” (Barclay, 1975, p. 218). This unity is indeed countercultural and revolutionary from what is currently seen and experienced in today’s society.

The early church that emerged in the book of Acts experienced this unity as they met in the upper room prior to Pentecost. Their eyes had been opened to the unity that existed between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit during the crucifixion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. They realized they were on a journey.

In Acts 9:2, the early church is referred to *as people of the way*. The Way is a recurring theme in Mark’s Gospel. In fact, Mark begins his gospel by quoting from the prophet Isaiah, “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” (Mark 1:2 NIV). John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Jesus then teaches his disciples on the way. These “early Christians understood the nature of life and mission as a messianic people by means of the ‘way’ image” (Driver, 1997, p. 50). This was their identity and their call.

This journey motif harkens back to Old Testament times of Abraham and his journey to go to the land God would show him. It is also reminiscent of when the children of Israel left Egyptian bondage and set out on the way to the Promised Land. They were guided on their way by a pillar of fire and the cloud. “In the OT passages, *hodos*, (the way), means ‘walk’, ‘conduct’, or ‘manner of life.’ But more often and more significantly, *hodos* means God’s will for his people” (Driver, 1997, p. 49).

The Old Testament is filled with references to walking in the way such as, Jeremiah 6:16, *the good way*, Proverbs 8:20, *the way of righteousness*, and Psalms 139:24, *the way everlasting*. The way of the Lord is in stark contrast to the *way of the wicked* as in Psalm 1:6 and Proverbs 4:19.

Similarly, Jesus is faithful to follow the way his Father has marked out for him. The way will go through the desert, the synagogue, through Samaria, into enemy territory and will lead to the cross and the tomb. As disciples of Jesus, we know that to follow him is a self-sacrificing way. It is a life of costly discipleship.

Seldom has this emphasis been more solely needed than in a pampered Western society, where even Christians often expect that social, political and economic systems, as well as the gospel of Jesus Christ will foster our self-indulgence and guarantee success in our ‘pursuit of happiness’ (Martens, 2001, p. 40).

### **The Need for Spiritually Formed Leaders to Equip God’s People for Missional Engagement**

Creating space to reflect on the ebb and flow of church history can help to project future trajectories, including areas of concern as well as areas of strength. Brueggemann (2018) says that “it is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order” (p.14). Throughout the course of history, God has always had prophetic voices speaking words of correction, encouragement and hope to his church.

While the old may be passing away or being dismantled, future realities are springing up for those with eyes to see. Spiritually formed leaders will have eyes to imagine a new future for missional engagement.

Brueggeman (2018) goes on to say that “we are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and is about to be given” (p. 14). The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us that

faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. It was by “faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going (Hebrews 11:1, 2, 8, NIV).

Abraham is an example of living out the prophetic imagination of unseen but certain future reality of the kingdom. He understood that going to a land that was not yet seen had implications not only for himself but for his household and future generations. Abraham was able to see far and today we need spiritually formed leaders who will have courage to move forward toward that which is not yet seen but only imagined with eyes of faith.

We live in a culture that offers a plethora of tools to help us in our spiritual journey. Books, apps, programs, podcasts, blogs, training centers, virtual learning platforms and more offer aid to those desiring to grow in their walk with Jesus. All of these are helpful and useful, but we must never become totally dependent on them to feed our souls. We are all being formed by something or someone whether we acknowledge it or not.

In their book, *The Missional Leader*, Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006) comment that the rapid change in the world around us makes a lot of us feel like immigrants in a new land. Our cultural context is now filled with a plethora of new images, needs, demands, expectations and attitudes that result in many feeling deeply disconnected from the present situation (p. 23).

For example, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it appeared that suddenly all the usual ways of doing church changed. There were new demands on technology and increased pressure on

pastors to meet needs of congregants while maintaining safe distance. Many felt disconnected. Returning to church as we once knew it has been a slow, gradual process. Some leaders acknowledged that during the pandemic it appeared that their congregants were shaped more by politics than by the Gospel.

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006) go on to note that “missional leaders must learn how to discern what God is doing in, through, and among all the movements of change in which a congregation finds itself” (p. 24). Leaders will need to develop the capacity to invite others to share their stories as a way of processing and understanding how their story fits into the larger narrative of God’s story. In addition,

Missional leaders understand and develop the capacity to innovate new *culture* within a congregation. At its core, missional church is how we cultivate a congregational environment where God is the center of conversation and God shapes the focus and work of the people. We believe this is a shift in imagination of most congregations; it is a change in the culture of congregational life (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006, p. 25-26).

Returning to the biblical examples of Abraham and Moses, we note that both of these patriarchs had imagination, courage and faith to envision a new future in a new land and a new culture. As Moses learned, shifting from a slave mentality to becoming the people of God culture was no easy task, but 40 years in the wilderness had served to form Moses as a spiritual leader who was prepared to lead others.

In considering other factors that shape missional leaders, we note that Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich (2005), in their book *The Critical Journey*, use stage theory as a model for

spiritual life. They believe that “the idea of movement through stages or phases within the life of faith has a long history in the Church” (p. 6). The movement in and out of the various stages is fluid and not necessarily orderly, but *movement* is one of the key components of this theory. Disciples may be in more than one stage at a time but leaders who are being spiritually formed will continue to make themselves available to God. Leaders learn new or different skills during a time of crisis, such as a pandemic. Challenging ministry seasons will reveal what is growing in our hearts.

Leaders who are being formed spiritually must be courageous enough to do the hard work of soul searching and retreat to their inner being, even being willing to enter the cloud of unknowing. Courage is not the absence of fear or tension, but rather, the fortitude to stand firm in the face of fear or chaos. “True confidence is courage that has been humbled. A broken leader is a sweet paradox of confidence and openness” (Allendar, 2006, pp. 74-75). Leaders are not necessarily those with all the correct answers, those with the most power or those with the greatest authority. Rather, Christ-like leaders are those who know they are dependent on God for help, those who admit their weakness, know their limitations and make space for others to use their gifts.

Peter Scazzero (2003) in his book *The Emotionally Healthy Church* comments that to truly love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength requires that we know not only God but also our interior – the nature of our own heart, soul and mind. Understanding that world of feelings, thoughts, desires and hopes with all its richness and complexity is hard work. It also takes time – lots of it (p. 55).

This learning to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength takes great courage and can be aided by the regular practice of contemplation.

In their recent book, *Embracing Contemplation*, Coe and Strobel (2019), write that much of “evangelical Christianity is marked more by doing than resting. It creates a certain temper that goes against the grain of contemplative prayer, which is, as will be seen shortly, a kind of resting” (p. 244). In seasons of stress and crisis, practices such as prayer, meditation, and scripture reading can be helpful tools to maintain an intimate Jesus-centered focus on life and ministry. Barton (2018) in her book *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, believes that “the discipline of solitude is a key discipline for all those who seek after God. It is the primary place where the leader’s soul is strengthened” (p. 31). Barton (2018) goes on to ask, “What would it look like for me to lead more consistently from my soul – the place of my own encounter with God – rather than leading primarily from my head, my unbridled activism, or my performance-oriented drivenness?” (p. 25).

This begs the question of whether our culture values the discipline of solitude? Jesus’s leadership consistently flowed from his times of prayer and solitude with his Father God. A baby grows in the darkness of the womb for nine months before birth. Seeds may lie fallow in the darkness of the soil for a season prior to germination. Even Jesus spent time in the darkness of Mary’s womb, the 40 days in the wilderness and the three days in the darkness of the tomb. Darkness, silence and solitude seem to be necessary ingredients for a healthy spiritual walk. As we have noted, busyness, hurry and noise are the primary distractions of our day. While not wrong in and of themselves, when we give in to the tyranny of constant busyness, they can lead to a discipleship that is shallow, self-serving, unsundered and hurried. Perhaps it would behoove us to regularly reflect on the words of Jesus to his beloved friends, Mary and Martha, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, or indeed only one.

Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41, 42, NIV).

Martha’s service was good and necessary. Her service was noticed and appreciated by the hungry disciples that traveled with Jesus, but it could not be allowed to take precedence over time spent with Jesus. Martha’s serving should flow out of Mary’s being with Jesus.

For leaders, there is a constant output. People expect their leaders to offer direction, assist with decision making. Leaders are expected to be discerning and to provide spiritual input. All of this output can take a toll on the health and well-being of a leader, unless like Mary, they are committed to spending time at the feet of Jesus. Jon Byler (2010) in his book on *The Heart of Christian Leadership*, remarks that “if I am going to give to people, I must receive from somewhere. What is my source? God Himself. Leaders must get into the presence of the Lord, receive direction from Him and then pass it on to others” (p. 62). Jesus understood this tension, which is why he regularly spent time in prayer. Leaders who spend time with Jesus are doing so in order to remain in touch with the vine and the spring of living water. They are positioning themselves to receive from the fullness of Christ.

In their recent book, *The Other Half of Church*, authors Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks (2002) write about the Christian community, brain science, and overcoming spiritual stagnation. They note that character growth must involve both the left and right sides of our brains. “Character formation, which is a primary responsibility of the church, is governed by the right brain, not the left brain” (p. 22). When we only engage one side of the brain in formation activities, healthy character development is stymied. “Left-brained discipleship emphasizes beliefs, doctrine, willpower, and strategies but neglects right-brain loving attachments, joy, emotional development, and identity. Ignoring right-brain relational development creates

Christians who believe in God's love but have difficulty experiencing it in daily life" (Wilder & Hendricks, 2002, p. 25). Could it be that the emphasis on left-brain beliefs, doctrine, willpower and strategy is a Type A theology from the Enlightenment period with its emphasis on rational thinking? How has this type of theology affected the spiritual formation of leaders?

Leaders who understand that all of life is spiritual and who are able to integrate what they are learning in their walk with Jesus while forming intentional, caring relationships with others and together living out those beliefs will impact their world for Christ. This type of discipling community model is very similar to what is seen in the book of Acts where, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42 NIV). This discipleship journey is not linear or without danger. The enemy of our souls will attempt to derail our growth, discourage us and steal our joy. Therefore, we should not be unaware of his evil schemes but rather, as Paul encourages us, to be prepared, wearing the full armor of God to enable us to stand firm. Some of the blockers or crises of faith on our journey will arise from our own false narratives, traditions or belief systems that hinder us from moving forward.

In considering potential blockers on the journey toward spiritual transformation, in their book about stages in the life of faith, Hagberg and Guelich (2005) refer to a crisis of faith as the *Wall*.

The *Wall* represents our will meeting God's will face to face. We decide anew whether we are willing to surrender and let God direct our lives. We enter the *Wall* with fear and trepidation, but we become less afraid of being afraid because of God's leading. We are on holy ground. We are dying to self and waiting to be reborn (pp.114-115).



This wall has the potential to become a transactional and transformational season in the life of a disciple. As much as we may attempt to go under, around, over or to scale the wall, we are unable to do so. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we must take the wall apart, piece by piece. Life at the wall is uncertain, frightening and oftentimes, messy. The past we know, the future is uncertain, both can be painful. At some point, the disciple must decide either to return to the old familiar pain or be courageous enough to embrace and surrender to the unknown, that which is on the other side of the wall. A disciple may move in and out of the stages of faith several times throughout their life. The discipleship journey is more like a spiral with each stage that is reached revealing more of God and less of self.

Standing at the wall is really an opportunity given us by God's grace. He is inviting us to be healed from our false narratives in order to more fully become our true selves which he created us to be. Out of that true self flows words and actions that bring him glory. As we begin to take the wall apart, piece by piece, we come to the realization that we have been led to this place by divine appointment. There is a dismantling taking place that we could never have attempted on our own. In reflecting on his own journey during the pandemic, Conrad Kanagy in his book, *A Church Dismantled: A Kingdom Restored*, (2021) writes,

The divine dismantling during this time of pandemic may be a moment of *Kairos* - a crucial time when conditions are right – when God is giving God's people an occasion for pausing to reflect and consider: 'How do we work with the Spirit rather than against the Spirit?' (p. 32).

Seasons of dismantling are messy, uncomfortable and uncertain. But unless we do the hard work of dismantling, the new cannot be birthed. Dismantling prepares the way for the new thing that God is doing. Isaiah the prophet cries out, "See, I am doing a new thing. Now it

springs up, do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:19 NIV). Unless the Spirit gives us eyes to see the new, we will fail to perceive the necessity of dismantling false narratives, structures, beliefs and traditions to which we have been holding. In his previous book, *Road Signs for the Journey*, Kanagy (2007) comments that,

the temptation for all of us, including church leaders, is to try to manage the changes – to become history stoppers in an effort to counter the disruption we face. But we have a unique opportunity in this moment to be history makers like Jeremiah by embracing the disruption and asking the missional question: ‘God, what *in the world* are you doing?’ (p. 66).

Prophetic voices, then and now, invite us to participate in the dismantling and the rebuilding in much the same way that God invited the prophet Ezekiel to walk among the dry bones in the valley. The very structure of the nation of Israel had been dismantled until they were no more than scattered bones lying in heaps on the ground. But, as Ezekiel was invited into this liminal space, he had the opportunity to perceive the new thing that God was doing by restructuring the bones and breathing Holy Spirit life into them. Leaders who are walking in step with the Spirit will have courage to face the wall, take it apart piece by piece and then, with the Spirit, perceive the new thing God is doing. By modeling courageous discipleship, these leaders will teach others to do the same.

In the final commission of Jesus to his disciples as recorded in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus told the disciples to,

go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age (NIV).

The disciples were instructed to go and do the same things that Jesus had done, which included making disciples, baptizing and teaching in the name of Jesus. Augsburg (1964), writes,

The Lord of the church has placed before the believers a mission: “Go ye therefore and teach all nations” or with the force of the original language, while going about in your personal world, make disciples of all men. The church has been commissioned by Christ to be on the offensive, moving into enemy territory to win persons to Him. However, the mission of the church has too often been handled much like a man planting a tree and building a fence around it for its protection, then spending most of his time keeping up the fence. The church is to be a conscience to society, a witness against the unbelief that rejects Christ, a bulwark of integrity in a world of decaying morals, but the church must be this and more by a positive contribution to society (pp. 9,10).

The Apostle Paul reaffirms and builds on these words of Jesus in Ephesians 4:11-13, when he writes,

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (NIV).

Paul also encourages all believers to put on the full armor of God because, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12 NIV). The goal is to make disciples by entering enemy territory. These disciples in turn, make disciples who make disciples, leading to maturity. How are we measuring maturity or, to put it another way, how do we know when we have mature disciples?

Greer and Horst (2014) in their book, *Mission Drift*, challenge leaders to reassess what they are measuring. Is what we measure directly related to the mission of Jesus? “Have we translated our mission into specific and measurable goals? What is not measured slowly becomes irrelevant” (pp.127,131). Our mission flows from God’s mission for the world. How it is lived out in contextual and practical terms may change, but the mission must remain the same as that which Christ gave to his disciples in Matthew 28. Asking the hard questions like: What metrics are we using? How effective are our discipling tools or processes? Are our disciple making tools producing disciples who make disciples and if not, why not? We must remain proactive to guard and protect the mission, otherwise drift is inevitable.

In a recent article by Impact Discipleship Ministries (2021), the writer comments that The mission of the Church of Jesus Christ is straight-forward. The mission we have been given is clear, concise and compelling. If at the end of the day we are not making some progress in making disciples, then we are drifting from the mission (Impact Discipleship Ministries, accessed 2/23/22).

There are many factors that can distract us from the mission, causing mission drift personally and organizationally. We can complicate the mission, get comfortable or fall into complacency. Awareness of our tendency toward drift should challenge us to regularly return to and review the reasons why we do what we do. This regular review also helps to safeguard against the attacks of the enemy who is ruthless in his attempts to derail and undermine the mission.

At the close of his life, the Apostle Paul was able to say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7 NIV). Paul was committed to die daily to himself in order to live for Christ. “We are being sent in the same way in which the Son was sent – as embodied message – incarnationally. Once again, as *Christ-ian* people, we are bound to model our sentness on our Founder and his ethos” (Hirsch, 2016, p. 136). As disciples

who claim Jesus as Lord and have accepted the call to follow, then we too, are sent to disciple, baptize and teach.

In his book, *The Missional Church in Context*, editor Craig Van Gelder (2007) cites the absurd example of a group of friends on a weeklong hiking expedition. As the friends hike through the wooded terrain of a national forest, suddenly the guide stops, looks around, and pulls out a much-folded map. As he studies the map for several minutes, another member of the party walks up beside him to also look at the map. Suddenly the second member throws up her hand and exclaims in frustration, “This will never get us where we are headed! It’s a map of downtown Kansas City” (pp. 145-146). The story illustrates, at times, how the church is functioning. We are in a season of change, dismantling and liminal space. The terrain does not match the map and we may feel lost. Van Gelder (2007) goes on to say that “in a time when the center has been called into question, it’s time to ask: ‘What is the mission of the twenty-first century church? What will be its cohesive principle?’” (p. 146). To begin to answer that question, we must return to the basics of the Sermon on the Mount.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began by teaching what we now refer to as the Beatitudes. If we take the Beatitudes as the plumb line for how we should live and act, we will be salt and light to the world. These values are opposite those of our culture, but they invite us to a higher standard. They are the attitudes by which Jesus followers are to live and act. “The Beatitudes uniquely offer us the gift of seeing and interpreting reality as God sees and interprets it, and that’s the beginning place for the Church” (Van Gelder, 2007, p. 99). False narratives abound but the list of beatitudes cuts through the corpus of incorrect belief systems and portrays kingdom reality. Often it is easier to believe our false cultural narratives than to reverse course and swim against the current. But failing to do this will not make us salt and light; we will not be spiritually formed leaders. In the beatitudes we are invited to enter the Jesus narrative and

demonstrate his story to a watching world.

As the Living Word, the word incarnate, by his life in word and in deed, Jesus lived the mission. “Incarnational ministry essentially means taking the church to the people, rather than bringing people to the church” (Hirsch, 2016, p. 145). Jesus traveled to where the people were who needed to hear the message of hope and salvation. In the Gospel of Luke, when people attempted to keep Jesus from leaving their towns, he responded by saying, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43, NIV). Jesus never allowed fame or lack of it to hinder him from the mission the Father had set before him. Knowing *why* and *by whom* we are sent will clarify our mission and motives.

A helpful example may be to consider an apple. We are familiar with the adage that within every apple lies the potential for an apple tree. In a similar way, Hirsch (2016) says that “The seed of the future is in the womb of the present. The possibility of movement lies at the root of the church’s existence” (p. 79). The Church was born as a movement and its very DNA carries the sending impulse. Can the Church be the Church without being called and sent out and is the Church developing spiritually formed leaders as part of the mission. In order to begin to address that question, we take a look at one particular context, an Anabaptist perspective on education and how it relates to spiritual formation.

### **An Overview of the Historical Anabaptist Approach to Education and Spiritual Formation and a Mennonite Specific Approach to Raising up Spiritually Mature Leaders in Order to Pursue God’s Mission**

The Anabaptist movement began in 1525 in Zurich Switzerland as part of the Radical Reformation. These early Anabaptists diligently studied the Bible to discern the will of God. They held group Bible study meetings and the fledgling Anabaptist movement grew from those group studies. In his book, *The History of Education*, Lester Showalter (1997) notes that “from the very beginning, Anabaptism was a grassroots movement. This group made the decision to

turn radically from the world systems of their day. The Bible was their textbook, and the kitchen table, as it were, was their school” (p.23). There seems to be no indication that these early Anabaptists encouraged their children to attend the educational institutions of their day nor did they want to establish their own schools. These early Anabaptists were not against education, but they were desirous of education for a godly purpose. It is unknown what other subjects may have been taught to the children or what methods were used, but we do know that both boys and girls were taught to read and write.

From the beginning, the Swiss Anabaptists were a persecuted people, and it became imperative that every member be thoroughly grounded in the Scriptural reasons for his beliefs. Their Anabaptist stand did not make them less diligent in education and study; it made them more diligent scholars (Showalter, 1997, p. 26).

Even their hymnals, (*The Ausbund*), which dates back to 1565, shows the value these believers placed on educating their children. Several hymns refer to teaching children and the importance of studying the scriptures. Whether at home, at school or at church, education as part of spiritual formation was woven into every aspect of daily life.

Because Anabaptism was a lay and not a clerical movement, every believer was in essence, a priest and a minister. A believer could not be a witness without a profound sense of being a believer by personal choice, by baptism, by Bible study, by congregational process. This was the secret of Anabaptist growth (Shenk, 2003, p. 39).

Early Anabaptists groups generally emphasized *living* the faith, rather than standardizing their doctrine or theology. They believed in the practical application of Biblical principles to shape their life and behavior. While not using the term spiritual formation, shaping one’s life and behavior is formation.

As Anabaptists, Mennonites do not have a clearly defined creed, a pope or a holy city, but

they have as their doctrinal center, a written Confession of Faith. These statements of belief have provided future generations with the main tenets of belief and practice. By adhering to these tenets in everyday life, they were instilling spiritual practices into the lives of those being disciplined. These early Anabaptists paid a high price for their faith and decision to separate from the state church and the world around them, living as witnesses counter to the current culture.

While many 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists were highly educated, they and others in the fledgling movement were martyred by the thousands in the early years. The loss of such leaders, and the fact that the primary antagonism toward Anabaptists came not from common folk but from other theologians and philosophers, contributed toward a relatively anti-intellectual stream in our tradition's middle centuries (Miller, 2000, p. 5).

This persecution and antagonism led to the search for a land where these believers could worship freely, in peace and without fear. For that reason, in 1683, the first German Mennonites came to Philadelphia where they were welcomed to settle Penn's Woods. The same year, the Pennsylvania Colony passed a law requiring all children to be instructed in reading and writing, so "that they may be able to read the Scriptures..." (Showalter, 1997, p. 33). Again, the impetus for learning to read and write was in order to read the Bible which they understood to contain instruction for godly living. The very first reading lessons included The Lord's Prayer and a statement about the Trinity.

Around 1690, the first edition of the *New England Primer* was published. The Primer included scriptures verses about training children, including 24 pages of catechetical questions and answers based on scripture. "Without public schools, the education of the children was largely the work of the local church communities" (Showalter, 1997, p. 39). Most of these schools were located in a church building or were closely connected. Clearly, the early Mennonites used their church houses for dual purposes, which is in keeping with their attitude



toward hard work and thriftiness. This close connection between church and school shows how closely intertwined and overlapping was the tie between spiritual formation and education. What the church taught was reinforced by the school which was again reinforced in the home.

Following World War II, Mennonites began to notice a shift in what was being taught in the public schools. These Mennonites

Saw consolidation and standardization in the public school system as encroachments on their God-given responsibility to teach their children. Also of concern were dances, sports and fashionable, immodest clothing. Since public schools were aspiring to define and shape basic values of life, some Mennonites responded by starting their own schools (Good, 1999, p. 17).

Between 1940 – 1947, eight Mennonite schools sprang up in Lancaster County. These schools reinforced the values, beliefs and standards set by their local congregations in dress and behavior. These grassroots schools clearly indicate that Mennonites were supportive of education and biblical study that would shape the next generation. They wanted to be able to control what was being taught in the classroom and by whom these subjects were taught.

In the early 1900s, a group of Mennonites moved to western Maryland, attracted by the rich farmland. Some members of the group set up farms just across the state line in Delaware. In 1914, they organized as the Greenwood Mennonite Church. Children attended the local public school. Then, in 1925, the Delaware state legislature introduced a law that the American flag should be prominent in every classroom and that all students should recite the pledge of allegiance. Some Mennonite families had serious reservations about this and so although their children continued to attend the public school, they did not recite the pledge. All was well until in 1928, a school board member lodged a complaint against these students. In response, the school principal began to enforce the requirement that all students recite the pledge. When the

Mennonite students refused, the principal took them aside and told them they couldn't return to school until they were willing to say the pledge. The Greenwood Mennonite School was born at that time as an alternative to public school. At first, many Mennonite Schools met in the church and only formally organized later. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than 40 schools had been created, from elementary schools to seminaries.

The resurgence of Mennonite schools in the 1940s and 50s was due in part to the militarism following World War II. When

Mennonite church leaders realized after the war that nearly fifty eight percent of young men in the General Conference Mennonite Church and thirty percent in the Mennonite Church had joined the military, they were forced to acknowledge that the biblical and theological foundations of nonresistance had not been adequately communicated to Mennonite youth (Roth, 2011, p. 55).

Hence, the formation of church-based schools were established in part to address the theological and cultural drift that was taking place among young people.

However, Mennonites were not alone, as other groups also formed faith-based schools to combat what they viewed as creeping secularization. The Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed and Jews also started faith-based schools aimed at educating the next generation. This preservationist model continues today among the Amish, Old-Order Mennonite groups, Baptists, fundamentalist and even in some non-denominational churches.

Roth (2011) believes that

the story of how the state came to claim responsibility for public education – effectively wresting it away from church control – suggests that the 20<sup>th</sup> century Mennonite impulse to return to church-based education has a deep historical precedent, ultimately going all the way back to the Jewish [T]orah school of Old Testament times (p. 38).

As mentioned earlier, Anabaptists used the Bible as their primary textbook and certainly knew passages from the Old Testament such as The Shema (meaning “to hear”)

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 NIV).

This passage as well as many others throughout the New and Old Testaments clearly places the responsibility for the education of children in the hands of their parents. The writer of Proverbs concurs as many of the proverbs and admonitions are addressed to “my son”.

Roth (2011) goes on to note five major shifts that established the context for the emergence of Mennonite Schools in North America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

1. Locus of control. A fundamental shift in the control of educational institutions from church to state and a shift away from theology as the focal point of education to a curriculum in which theology became one field of study among many.
2. Educational access. For much of history, everyone was needed at home to work to feed themselves. Education was a luxury enjoyed only by the elite. With the birth of modern democracies came the new phenomenon of mass education.
3. Content. As the modern state claimed greater control over public education, it was inevitable that both the organization of educational institutions and the content of its curriculum would reflect the changing needs and interests of the state.
4. Standards. As the state gained control over public education, many one-room schools with one teacher who had limited education, were closed. Instead, higher standards for

education were enacted. This meant that teachers also needed additional education as instruction became more specialized.

5. Expanded scope of Education. In the one-room schools, teaching was limited to the three “R’s”. Now, there is a plethora of educational courses available with new courses being added each year (pp. 39-48).

Keith Miller, in his book *Teaching to Transform*, noted that Mennonites were considered by some to be late comers to the field of higher education. While other religious groups were building institutions to train and equip leaders, Mennonites were, for the most part, out in the field, working to feed their families. Miller (2000) believes that “Mennonite efforts at establishing colleges were manifestations of both an embracing of and a resistance to acculturation” (p. 3). Miller (2000) goes on to note that

Mennonites truly have a rich heritage of earnest discipleship, voluntarism, a Biblicism which acknowledges the lordship of Christ; pacifism, an ecclesiology of a mutually accountable and covenanted body of believers; a willingness to be countercultural regarding those parts of culture that need to be countered; and a wisdom born out of experience and commitment (p. 2).

Any educational institution that is modeled after these key ideals cannot help but flourish and equip a new generation of leaders. But it takes a deliberate and sacrificial effort to keep these ideals in focus. In any institution, those who work there must support the philosophy of the institution, which must be communicated frequently and through a variety of means. When an institution or organization fails in this task, drift is inevitable.

While many Mennonite schools trace their origin to a particular moment in history that led to a new school being founded, many Mennonite educational institutions now serve a wide

variety of students from faith or no-faith backgrounds who have no interest in preserving the Mennonite heritage but are rather seeking a quality education. Although this has provided opportunity for missional outreach, it has also eroded some of the historical foundations upon which these schools were built, another example of mission drift. Roth (2011) states that “given the increasing diversity of its constituency, Mennonite schools today struggle with what might be called the ‘embarrassment of particularity’” (p. 68). They fear that claiming a distinctive theological identity too explicitly will be perceived by others as inhospitable or arrogant” (Roth, 2011, p. 68). Given today’s ethos of tolerance, these schools may have a right to be concerned. However, at its best, this diversity has led supporters to be more intentional in their theological convictions and at its worst, it has opened the door to theological confusion.

In 1964, due to a plethora of educational and theological concerns, the Mennonite Board of Education asked the Higher Education Council to identify a philosophy of education for Mennonite schools. The members of this committee represented the Mennonite Board of Education, the schools of the Mennonite Church, the Mennonite Commission for Christian Education, the Mennonite Publishing House and two Mennonite Mission agencies. The task of this commission was to identify the following:

1. A theology to inform church education
2. The educational development of persons in light of our theology
3. The implications of these findings for education in the home, congregation and school
4. Find ways to have these implications put into practice by the church (Hertzler, 1971, p. 13).

This was no small task for this commission! In their work, they attempted to address the purpose of education and the elements critical to a good education. They were also concerned

with fostering healthy relationships. Finally, they discussed what theory(ies) to follow. The scope of their work was impressive and was carried out over a period of five years. The committee in turn created subcommittees who were tasked with specific objectives.

In beginning to identify the purposes of education, they recognized that “education is not for itself alone. It needs to be related to a greater cause” (Hertzler, 1971, p. 18). Within that framework, this committee noted the following six core values.

1. The purpose of education is defined in the context of the purposes of a people
2. The people of God are distinct with a unique calling
3. This requires a clear history and sense of identity
4. Educating others for service and witness is important
5. The values taught must be practiced
6. The educational program must be evaluated to guard against self and outside pressures (Hertzler, 1971, p. 18).

These core values are drawn directly from the command of Jesus to make disciples. The values affirm the call to be set apart that first came to Abraham and through him to all nations. It is through this call that we understand whose we are. Education is not an end in itself but is linked intrinsically with spiritual formation. Neither stands alone, but both are necessary for movement toward maturity and understanding God’s mission for his world.

In addition to defining the core values and the purpose for education, the next task for the commission was to determine the elements of the educational process. Four elements were included in the study: background information and perspective; teaching of values; training in skills and development of a personal worldview within the framework of God’s larger story of redemption. This development of a Biblical worldview is critical for the discipleship journey.

The third question they addressed was: What relationships and social settings will foster learning? In reflecting on the history, they noted that education is best accomplished in community. It is in community that people have an opportunity for personal interaction and time

to test ideas with others on a similar journey. They also reaffirmed a premise that earlier Anabaptists had built upon in that the family is the initial learning community where children are disciplined and learn basic skills, roles, socialization, and values.

Finally, they addressed the question of learning theory. In reviewing various theoretical models, they noted that “there is no one theory of personality or learning that is completely satisfactory from the viewpoint of Christian education (Hertzler, 1971, p. 25). The committee saw some potential in the work of Freud, Erikson and other behaviorists but none seemed to fit fully with their Christian worldview and mission.

From the work of these various committees and questions, a ten-point educational strategy was proposed that included the understanding of the priesthood of all believers where everyone is equipped for ministry, not only certain people who are called as the leaders. There was also a shared awareness that more than Sunday School was needed for spiritual formation. This awareness resulted in the establishment of some church-sponsored schools.

In addition to the work of these committees, Donald Kraybill has written and researched extensively on Mennonite education. Although some of Kraybill’s work is dated, much is still applicable as he comments on the critical need for Mennonite education in light of the rapid industrial changes and urbanized society in which we live. New careers are being identified regularly and the family is no longer all together on the farm and living with other extended family members. Kraybill (1978) notes that the “Mennonite occupational structure is being turned upside-down overnight and scattering us along all the rungs of the job ladder and making us a very heterogeneous and diverse group of people” (p. 55). This change has huge implications for education, spiritual formation and the church. With the change in the family structure and often both parents working outside the home, children are often shuttled to a daycare or nursery school at an early age. Parents spend much less time with their children and the education that is

done is left to the schools and churches or to TV and media. Today, instead of being the community where everyone gathers for teaching and fellowship, the church is merely one competing agency among many between which parents must divide their time, money and energy.

Kraybill also noted that in the past, the church served as a deterrent to bad behavior because everyone knew everyone else's business. If someone misbehaved, other members took note because the community was always watching. Kraybill (1978) goes on to note that "the replacement of congregational reference groups with occupational reference groups decreased the church's ability to maintain uniform convictions and patterns of behavior" (p. 61).

The glue that used to hold families and congregations together has changed but that is not necessarily a negative. In noting these changes, Kraybill (1978) is aware that "the role of church schools becomes more crucial and essential in light of these emerging shifts" (p. 64). He believes it is essential that some of the formative years of a young person's life be spent in church schools "to assure exposure to Christian perspectives and Mennonite viewpoints. Rather than fragmenting the church, education can have a homogenizing effect if students are exposed to uniform perspectives on Biblical theology and Anabaptist history" (p.65). However, another factor to consider is cost. With the cost of private education skyrocketing, many parents who might want to send their children to a Mennonite school may not have the financial resources to be able to do so.

In comparing the sheer number of hours spent in school to the number of hours spent in church, it should be noted that school has the potential to be an effective setting for quality Christian education.

With parents and congregations teaching less, the quality of Christian community modeled by the faculty has a great potential for teaching youth not only what the church believes but how it behaves. The school, more than any other



institution, is essential in shaping and transmitting the Anabaptist vision (Kraybill, 1978, pp. 66, 68).

Even though not all Christian schools are what they should or could be, they still stand as an important tool in shaping the identify and education of our children. In some ways, the philosophy of education has been completely reversed. As noted earlier, the early Anabaptist Mennonites believed strongly that the duty of education lay squarely with the parents and the church. Now, much of the spiritual formation of our children is resting in the hands of instructors at private Mennonite schools and colleges.

As the Mennonite community continued to wrestle with the need for quality education in school, there was a growing awareness of needing to form spiritually mature leaders for the next generation. LMC (Lancaster Mennonite Conference), a conference of over 200 congregations, decided to offer their own training programs.

In the Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) in the 1950s and 60s, there was a strong nurture program known as Winter Bible School. Hundreds of participants were part of this program. In addition, during the 1960s and into the 1970s, the Paul-Timothy project and Mennonite Christian Leadership Foundation offered programs and seminars for leaders. When attendance began to decline, a group of men from five Mennonite Conferences met in 1971 to discuss educational needs for their conferences. The decision was made to offer one-week courses known as Keystone Bible Institute (KBI) Courses. The KBI program began in February 1972 and ran through June of 1994. During that 22-year period, KBI expanded to over ten locations and had a peak attendance of 1600-1700 participants.

While in its prime, KBI offered courses on Intro to the New Testament, Management Principles and Theory, Anabaptist Theology, Home Arts, Managing Home Finances and a class on the Life and Teachings of Christ. Some of these courses could be taken for credit which was

awarded by Eastern Mennonite College. A minor registration fee was required plus the cost of any books. At that time, a \$45 additional fee was assessed for those wishing to take the courses for college credit. A program director was hired to oversee the classes and instructors were identified. It should be noted that at the beginning, these classes were for men. Later non-credit classes were added for women which included: home arts, knitting, ceramics, tailoring and the devotional life. Due to declining enrollment, KBI was eventually discontinued.

With the discontinuation of the KBI and other educational programs, Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) began to look at other alternatives to train and equip leaders. One training opportunity that emerged was *Discovery*. This is an eight-session missional Anabaptist leadership training written by former LMC staff, that encourages participants to:

1. Encounter God in a fresh and intimate way
2. Confirm gifts you have received from the Spirit
3. Learn more about your personality and how you relate to others
4. Review life experiences and discover your passion for serving others
5. Clarify your unique life purpose as a follower of Jesus
6. Develop a growth plan that helps you move toward the future God intends for you
7. Engage in a mentoring relationship that will support your growth over the next two years (*Discovery* brochure, LMC website).

*Discovery* has been an invaluable tool for encouraging spiritual formation in teens and adults. The entire curriculum was recently translated into Spanish to make it accessible for the many Spanish speaking congregations in LMC. The majority of the curriculum has also been incorporated into the STEP program, an explanation of which follows.

In the mid-1990s, the bishops of Lancaster Mennonite Conference proposed a new initiative in leadership development which was reviewed and approved by the bishops in 1997. In 1998, the conference hired staff for the development of this leadership initiative and also contacted Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) to discuss a shared partnership with the potential for the program to be a credit bearing initiative offered in Lancaster.

STEP (Study and Training for **E**ffective **P**astoral ministry) is thus the result of the collaborative work of LMC and EMU. A curriculum development team was formed with representatives from EMU and LMC. In addition, the board of bishops and numbers of other individuals provided support and contributed materials from their own work. Counsel was received from Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Indiana Michigan Mennonite Conference and Franklin Mennonite Conference. The work of STEP was truly a collaborative effort among various groups and individuals. Finally, in 2004 the curriculum work was completed, copyrighted and recruitment began for the first cohort.

As part of the charter, twelve learning outcomes drawn from Mennonite and Anabaptist educational history have been identified to guide the formation process. The frequent reference to Scripture, community, accountability, attention to the work of the Spirit and other references all reflect on the work and writings of earlier Mennonite historians, educators and sociologists. STEP would not be what it is today without the wealth of historical and theological support from previous generations.

The purpose of STEP is to train and equip pastors, leaders and emerging leaders for growth in spiritual maturity (being), biblical and historical knowledge (knowing), and ministering skills as well as visionary and missionary leadership (doing), becoming effective ministers in revitalized and multiplying congregations in God's kingdom. The STEP mission statement is to: Develop transformed leaders for skilled and spirit-led ministry in congregations and in the world (STEP Oversight Commission, charter documents).

Study and Training for **E**ffective **P**astoral ministry (STEP) is a part-time, three-year training course that was originally designed to train and equip pastors. Over the course of three years, students may earn up to 30 undergraduate credits through EMU. Classes are held at the

LMC offices one Saturday per month for eight hours a day, nine months of each year. Students progress through the program as a cohort. The curriculum integrates many topics and pastoral skills as well as personal and spiritual formation elements. During their time in STEP, students will move through the entire Biblical story as well as work through the 26 articles in the 1995 Mennonite Confession of Faith.

Incorporated with the being, knowing and doing elements of the program is a deep desire to develop transformed, missional leaders who will also make disciples. The personal and spiritual formation classes, along with the strong emphasis on development of a Christocentric hermeneutic, is a continued attempt to dismantle some of the remaining elements of Christendom and the Enlightenment. The cohort model has proven to be an effective tool for developing relationships across cultures, gender and racial barriers. Instructors are equipped to encourage students to think deeply, move outside their comfort zones and develop life-long tools and spiritual practices for ongoing transformation.

There are currently about 19 instructors who teach during the three-year period. Instructors must have a minimum of a Masters degree from an accredited institution. Cohort sizes range from six to eighteen students. Although STEP began as a program to train pastors, currently only about fifty percent of students are pastors. Some individuals are in the program to explore a call to ministry while others are moving into or already serving as a pastor. All Year 3 students are required to complete a missional project outside their local congregation. This includes forming an advisory committee, developing the purpose of the project, communication and advertisement and all the steps necessary to carry out the project. In many ways, the missional project is the culmination of the three years of study as each student demonstrates what they have been learning as disciples of Jesus.

The purpose statement continues to guide and shape the program and more importantly,

the people. Although there have been and will continue to be changes, the desire is to avoid mission drift and remain true to the Biblical foundation upon which the program is built. The STEP program serves as one example of a discipleship training model in which current and potential leaders are being spiritually formed and equipped to lead in their contexts. One of the questions before us is how well the STEP program has done at retaining and communicating the missional impulse inherent in the core values of LMC. Is the STEP program making disciples who make disciples? How well are the students being spiritually formed?

## **Conclusion**

In the overview of church history, we have seen the importance of story and how story is an opportunity to engage and draw others in. God's design from the beginning has been to invite people into a love relationship. Each generation has responded to that invitation in differing ways. History has shown the momentous task each generation has of passing on the faith to the next generation.

In Luke 9:23, Jesus said to those who were nearby, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (NIV). Denying oneself means putting down something in order to take up the cross to which Jesus calls us. Leaders who are spending time in the presence of Jesus, acknowledging that he is Lord are being spiritually formed by him. These leaders will understand that the intimacy being developed is not merely for themselves but is part of the larger story and mission on the heart of God for the world.

Below in chart form is an overview of the key discipleship tenets and the connections between those tenets and the literature review. In a following chapter, a column related to conclusions drawn from the data will be added.

<i>Discipleship</i>	<i>History/Theology</i>	<i>Data</i>
<i>Jesus is Lord</i>	Modernity – individualism	
	Church/State/Emperor/Pope – Caesar is lord	
	Follow me as I follow my Father	
<i>God is relational</i>	Holy Spirit is our helper	
	Practices include: Bible reading, community, believer's baptism, prayer, repentance	
<i>God's mission must be the mission of the Church</i>	Domesticated view of Jesus during Christendom	
	Mission got confused with structure and hierarchy	

## **Research Design**

### **Approach and Methodology**

Turning from the Literature Review, we now focus on the Research Design. The working thesis for this project is to develop a 21st Century missional, leadership formation training platform for the church leader based on a Jesus-centered, Anabaptist focused, kingdom approach to discipleship. This thesis is in keeping with the LMC mission statement as the first priority of the mission statement is to make disciples. The full mission statement reads: “A Spirit-led movement to: make disciples of Jesus, mobilize every member as a missionary, and multiply faith communities locally and beyond!” According to the LMC website, “This mission statement is grounded in our unique understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the mission of love, peace and reconciliation God has called us to as a fellowship of Anabaptist congregations” (LMC website, accessed March 2022). Becoming a Spirit-led movement to make disciples is a journey that will require mobilizing everyone and their resources of time, talent and treasure to make this a reality.

This project is designed as a social science dissertation. The purpose of this type of research is to achieve a deeper understanding of the topic being researched by engaging and drawing from what was learned in the literature review in Chapter 2 to confirm, amplify, or modify it from data drawn from human experience. The social science approach was chosen because it allows for a theory to emerge organically from the collected data. Creswell (2007) notes that “qualitative research occurs in natural settings, where human behavior and events occur.” (p. 195). Kvale (1996), as quoted by Gumbrium and Holstein (2001), writes,

The original Greek meaning of the word *method* is ‘a route that leads to the goal’. The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asking questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of the lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as ‘wandering together with’. The design of qualitative interview research is open-ended in the sense that it is more concerned with being attuned to who is being traveled with, so to speak, than with setting out a precise route for all to follow, as in survey research (p.86).

A qualitative research method has been chosen for precisely this reason. Discipleship is also a journey during which participants share stories of how they see the Holy Spirit at work in their lives and the lives of those around them. This type of research involves real people in everyday life. They are “real entities, not simply abstract, formal plans or models” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 71). Although the method of discipling others may involve formal programs, it may also be much more difficult to quantify the effect of those plans and may be a messy, meandering process, rather than linear with measurable goals. Maxwell (2012) goes on to say that the actions of the researcher and the participants “is itself a real phenomenon that may differ substantially from what was planned, and even from what the researcher thinks is happening” (p.71). In qualitative research, we are dealing with words and meanings of words whereas in quantitative research, we deal with numbers and statistics, which was not the focus of this project. Quantitative research involves analyzing statistical data to prove or disprove an existing theory. Conversely, with qualitative research, the researcher engages with individuals or groups of people, attempting to understand the meaning of what they are saying and interpreting the meaning to develop a theory.



For that reason, the researcher has chosen to use a grounded theory method for this research. This type of approach allows for the discovery of new theories to emerge from the collected data. The researcher does not have preconceived ideas or theories of what the data will show. Rather, as the data is analyzed, the theory is revealed. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), “a grounded theory approach encourages researchers to remain close to their studied worlds and to develop an integrated set of theoretical concepts from their empirical materials that not only synthesize and interpret them but also show processual relationships” (p. 508). In this particular study, the researcher will continue to remain in contact with the participants and will have opportunities to engage with them as part of the ongoing discipleship process.

In chapter one, the focus was primarily on the question of “Is the Church living as though Jesus is Lord?” and if not, what factors have contributed to the drift from radical discipleship to an easy discipleship? What does it mean to be called by Jesus to be his disciple? And in what ways has the Church responded to the command of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 to go and make disciples of all nations and how have those ways contributed to or mitigated disciple making efforts? How are we making sure to pass the faith on to the next generation?

### **Description of Research Population and Rationale**

These are questions that encompass a large body of literature and centuries of church history, so in order to narrow the focus, one particular Anabaptist group was chosen, LMC (Lancaster Mennonite Conference). This is a conference of over 240 congregations, scattered over 14 states and five countries. The researcher has worked in the area of discipleship with this group of congregations for over five years and has developed positive relationships

with a number of the leaders, thus providing a workable convenience sample for the gathering of relevant data. Previous work by the researcher in the area of discipleship has included: training events for children and youth ministry leaders, prayer gatherings, large group events for the purpose of leadership training, staff training and an annual conference event that includes plenary speakers and seminars related to discipleship.

This research group included a convenience sample group of bishops and pastors from the more than twenty different LMC districts. Creswell (2009) recommends “purposefully selecting participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question.” (p.178). When finding participants, Gubrium and Holstein (2001) question,

Whom does one interview? In the logic of survey research, interviews are conducted with a representative sample of a larger population, drawn systematically in order that the finding will be generalizable to that population. Using theoretical sampling strategy, the interviewer seeks out respondents who seem likely to epitomize the analytic criteria in which he or she is interested (p. 87).

These particular individuals were selected from the larger LMC footprint with the understanding that these sources met the following criteria:

- 1) Prior existing and ongoing relationship with the researcher.
- 2) Awareness by the researcher that these individuals had an interest in or passion for discipleship.
- 3) Awareness by the researcher that the majority of these individuals were already engaged in discipleship within their local contexts.

These criteria were important because the researcher recognized that those who had already exhibited an interest in this topic and were already heavily engaged in discipleship would provide the most useful data from which a theory could emerge. In addition to the criteria above, the participants were chosen to include gender and cultural diversity. Because those being invited to participate were from districts throughout LMC, some of which are located in rural areas and others located in major metropolitan areas such as New York City and the Washington/Baltimore areas. Marital status and economic status were not taken into consideration as part of this study.

### **Data Collection and Support for Methodology**

Thirty-six invitations were sent by email to the selected participants, inviting them to participate in the research either via an in-person interview or by completing an online survey.

Email was utilized as the primary communication method for the following reasons:

1. Email is the primary method of communication with LMC leaders and as such, is a familiar and accepted form of communication.
2. Ease of accessibility to email contact lists.
3. Prior email communication between the researcher and the participants.

The interview as a tool for gathering information has been used for centuries. One Biblical example from the Old Testament would be the census commissioned by God in Number 1:2, “Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one’ (NIV). In order to take a census, some type of interview process would have had to be used to obtain the necessary data. In the New Testament in Luke 2:1, we read that “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world” (NIV). Reading on in this passage, we learn that Mary and Joseph had to

travel to Bethlehem in order to participate in the census, which certainly would have involved some form of face-to-face interview.

In more recent times, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note that the tradition of interviewing evolved from two trends. First, interviewing found great popularity and wide-spread use in clinical diagnosis and counseling where the concern was with the quality of responses. Second, during WWI, interviewing came to be widely employed in psychological testing (p. 699).

Today, interviewing is used as a census tool, for telemarketing purposes, in all types of media, in congregational settings, and as a research tool. According to Denzin and Lincoln,

the interviewer plays a neutral role, never interjecting his or her opinion of a respondent's answer. The interviewer must establish what has been called 'balanced rapport'; he or she must be casual and friendly on the one hand, but must be directive and impersonal on the other (p.702).

In other words, the interviewer must demonstrate a welcoming and open posture, but also be able to keep the conversation focused. During an interview, the researcher should be able to maintain eye contact, avoid a closed body posture and be able to listen well to verbal and nonverbal cues. This particular type of methodology lends itself to empirical research rather than statistical data.

For the purpose of this project, as much as possible, research was conducted via in-person interviews. Persons being interviewed were informed in advance that the purpose of the conversation was for research related to discipleship methods being utilized within their local context. Participants were not asked to sign a form giving written permission to be interviewed as none of the interviews were recorded and no names were used in compiling the research, thus

ensuring confidentiality. All participant responses were recorded anonymously. In addition, no minor children or other vulnerable populations were interviewed during this process.

Those being interviewed were invited to share stories from personal or congregational experiences. During the interview, the researcher focused on the participant, attempted to maintain eye contact and displayed a welcoming body posture throughout the conversation. As part of the in-person interviews, the researcher was able to note the body language of the person being interviewed. Notes were taken with the verbal consent of the participant, giving the researcher opportunity to review the notes multiple times to delve into the fullness of the conversations. Each in-person interview lasted an average of one hour.

Since LMC has congregations in 14 states and five countries, in-person interviews were not always feasible. Persons from outside the Lancaster area were invited to participate either via online video conferencing or by completing an electronic document. The document consisted of eight questions with space for participants to write a sentence or several paragraphs. One additional question was multiple choice in which the respondent was offered five possible responses from which to choose. Questions were sent in advance to the persons being interviewed.

Since several formats were used during the data collection process, it should be noted that those who participated in the online survey also had the opportunity to request an in-person interview if so desired. The in-person interviews covered the same questions as the online survey but tended to offer more in-depth information and longer stories. As noted earlier, individuals process differently and although everyone had the opportunity to respond to the same questions, some preferred an in-person interview due to personal preference. During the

in-person interviews, the researcher remained conscious of the time, the purpose of the meeting and worked to keep the conversation focused and on task throughout.

A secondary method of data collection was obtained via personal engagement and observation within a local district. This particular LMC district hosted an eight-week discipleship training course, and the researcher was invited to be one of the presenters for one of the sessions. The presenter taught on the topic of the importance of understanding your passion and call as a follower of Jesus. After speaking, the attendees were divided into small groups for discussion and processing the information. The researcher was able to participate in one of the small groups and casually observe the interaction among participants. Over eighty people participated in the training. Following the eight-week course, the researcher received a one-page summary report from the bishop of that district. The bishop noted that forty of the eighty-two persons who participated were under the age of twenty-five. As a follow up, they are planning to offer an evening of prayer and prophetic ministry for these young adults as a way of encouraging continued growth.

In the same district, the researcher attended a fundraising event hosted by a local addiction recovery ministry. One of the secondary goals of this recovery ministry is discipleship. The researcher was able to hear stories from individuals who have been impacted by this ministry. During this event, the researcher was present as a silent observer, but was able to appreciate the passion the participants have for this work and ministry. For the researcher, this was simply an opportunity to be present, observe, and be inspired by stories of a recovery ministry that also focuses on discipleship.

In another LMC district the researcher was invited to join a district meeting to talk about discipleship. The researcher has had several conversations with one of the bishops in this district during which she shared her concerns for the need for discipleship training in her district. During the district meeting, the researcher had the opportunity to talk about STEP as a discipleship training tool, answer questions from the participants, and offer online resources for follow up. The researcher anticipates additional conversation with these district leaders.

### **Research Questions**

The questions that were given to the participants were selected because they were pertinent to the working thesis for this project and aligned with the LMC mission statement. The LMC mission statement's first priority is to be a Spirit-led movement that makes disciples. Understanding what leaders and congregations are currently doing to make disciples will be helpful in ascertaining what additional work, resources, education or training may be needed in order to move this priority forward.

Questions that were given to participants focused on personal formation, congregational formation, and leadership training. One question invited participants to reflect on their experience with the LMC STEP program and the impact it has had on their discipleship journey. The purpose for asking these questions was to begin to get a glimpse into the spiritual journey's of leaders and to understand what factors were influencing and/or contributing to their spiritual growth. In addition, leaders were asked to comment on what factors they saw as having an impact on the spiritual life of those in their congregations.

The researcher was also interested in understanding what resources were being used to promote, encourage and strengthen discipleship within the congregation. Were congregations using formal or informal tools? Did they have a plan for discipleship? And what resources could be helpful in the future?

## **Data Collection Rationale**

Data collection is a familiar method for LMC constituents. On an annual basis, leaders are invited to respond to questions using a data dashboard tool. Bishops and pastors are familiar with this survey method and value this type of tool. In the past, leaders have been invited to assist in determining what should be measured and what type of questions should be included.

Given the familiarity with this type of data collection tool, participants in this project were offered the option of either responding to a survey via google form or participating via an in-person interview. Consideration of personality and communication preference was also taken into account by the researcher, with the awareness that some individuals are more comfortable completing a survey while others prefer to respond verbally and in-person.

Interpretation of face-to-face conversation has an element of subjectivity, however using the same focused questions for each individual is one way to attempt to maintain integrity. The researcher anticipates ongoing conversation with the participants as a way of confirming the validity of the material along with a desire to continue to strengthen relationships.

During her tenure at LMC, the researcher has been able to develop positive relationships with a number of the bishops and pastors. Having this prior relationship was an asset in obtaining responses since participants were familiar with the researcher. The topic of discipleship is one that the researcher has been engaged in for over forty years and has been a life-long area of interest and passion for the researcher. This longevity brings a measure of authenticity to the research since this is not a new topic for the researcher.

## **Analysis of Data**

In analyzing the results, Creswell (2009) comments that “the process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves ... moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning



of the data” (p.183). In discussing the qualitative approach to data analysis, Creswell (2009) goes on to say that “the researcher collects qualitative data, analyzes it for themes or perspectives, and reports 4-5 themes” (p.184).

Reviewing the data can and should be a multi-step process. Steps in this process include coding the data, looking at the raw material, organizing and preparing it for analysis, looking for themes and interpreting the meaning of the data. Creswell (2009) recommends that a first step “is to obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning” (p. 185).

As part of this process, common trends, patterns and reoccurring themes were identified from responses received. Recommendations for change or resourcing were noted along with suggested next steps to strengthen existing discipleship methods. As indicated, some respondents simply shared stories from personal experiences. In many cases, the stories were left unfinished because the discipleship journey is ongoing, and the end is still being written. Personal experiences are more difficult to analyze since there is an element of subjectivity involved. However, experiences can serve to provide a broader framework and context for how discipleship happens within the larger LMC footprint.

In order to protect the respondents and to avoid any ethical concerns, all responses have been kept anonymous in the written report. The intent was not to focus on individuals as much as it was to obtain a broad overview of the LMC discipling contexts. A summary report of the information collected can be available to interested LMC district leaders.

Based on the questions asked during the interview process, participant responses were organized and summarized according to the following topics:

- 1) Personal experiences/storytelling about discipleship
- 2) Congregational experiences in the area of discipleship
- 3) Discipleship methods used for training new leaders
- 4) Impact of the STEP program to train new leaders
- 5) Summary and potential next steps

In addition to noting themes and patterns within the data, the researcher should decide how to arrange the data. For example, will the data be written as a narrative summary or told in case study format? What types of illustrations will be used including tables, graphs or figures? Including illustrations as well as narrative can be helpful in conveying the deeper meaning of the data. According to Creswell (2009), a

final step in data analysis involves making an interpretation or meaning of the data. These lessons could be the researcher's personal interpretation, couched in the understanding that the inquirer brings to the study from her or his own culture, history and experiences (p. 189).

It may also be helpful to include reflections on lessons the researcher learned, making comparisons or identifying new questions.

The next chapter focuses on analyzing and offering the researcher's interpretation of the collected data. Themes are identified, questions asked, and some of the responses shared (albeit anonymously).

## **Data Collection and Results**

### **Data Collection Overview and Researcher Bias**

Data collection is a vital part of any research project and can provide the opportunity for the researcher to delve more deeply into their area of interest. Creswell (2009) notes that "it involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data" (p. 183). In order to go deeper, as the researcher, I must view the data from different perspectives. Obtaining an overall view of the data collected is one step in the process. Gaining a general sense of the information will include answering questions such as: "What general ideas are participants saying? What is the tone of the ideas?" (Creswell, 2009, p. 185).

The data for this research was conducted primarily in written survey form and via face-to-face interviews. Several internal LMC written documents were also accessed to verify data. A total of twenty-five people responded for a response rate of sixty-nine percent. The respondents included twenty men and five women. Of the responses received, ten were from bishops and fifteen were from pastors. Responses were received from nineteen of the twenty districts for a response rate of ninety-five percent. The research within LMC districts also included thirteen responses from STEP graduates and/or STEP instructors since STEP has been a primary leadership development program within the LMC context for the past eighteen years.

Following an overall read of the material, I began by coding the data to identify emerging themes and images. As the researcher, I may want to choose one or more comments that appear to stand out. These comments may lead to asking deeper questions and uncovering additional layers of meaning. Peeling back the layers may lead to unexpected or surprising perspectives. As themes emerge from the data, I identify and cluster similar topics, noting descriptive words or images that occur regularly. Narrative text, used throughout this chapter, is the most common form used for qualitative research.

Awareness of researcher biases are also critical. Each researcher and participant bring their own bias based on life experiences and background. Creswell (2009) encourages the researcher to clarify the bias they bring.

This self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers. Good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the finding is shaped by their background, such as their gender, culture, history and socioeconomic origin (p. 192).

As a researcher, one must be prepared to also incorporate unexpected data. Including this type of data adds to the authenticity and validity of the research.

As a researcher, I bring my personal bias to the table. I have been engaged in various discipleship programs, small groups and leadership positions for the past forty years. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to observe a variety of resources, teaching methods, and have participated in numerous training events. There have been times when I have rejoiced to see followers of Jesus fall more deeply in love with him and become rooted and grounded in his word. At other times, I have experienced grief when my time with someone has seemed too short and they have chosen an alternative path. My bias is based on the firm belief that discipleship is a kingdom principle and that as followers of Jesus, we must be calling, training and equipping leaders for the future if we are to pass the faith on to the next generation. I firmly believe that as we rest in the love of Jesus and love him in return, he can and will use anyone regardless of age, gender, skill set, ethnicity or any other qualification.

A part of my bias is rooted in the church growth culture. Coming of age in the 1980's when much was being written about church growth, megachurches and small groups influenced my thinking and imagination about how to grow churches and develop disciples. I also participated in a number of ecumenical prayer gatherings where people spoke in tongues, words of knowledge were given and prayers for healing were common. These ecumenical gatherings convinced me that prayer is an essential ingredient in discipleship and the life of the church. For followers of Jesus, I am convinced that prayer is the work.

In addition, I have been privileged to be part of a church plant where prayer and discipleship were key ingredients. Unfortunately, due to a variety of circumstances, as the prayer life of the congregation waned and discipleship faded into pep talks, I have also seen the toll that lack of prayer and a focus on self takes on a local congregation. This experience has strengthened my belief in the centrality of prayer and the need for a Jesus centered discipleship focus.

A portion of my bias is toward the LMC STEP program. For two years, I served as instructor in the program, teaching year one and year two students in the area of personal formation. Following those two years as an instructor, I was invited to move into the role of Director. I am currently in my third year as director. I have heard many stories of how lives have been transformed by this program. People frequently tell me that there is an element of Holy Spirit inspiration present within the program. In the director role, I have the opportunity to interview each student prior to their entrance into the program and have been repeatedly blessed and encouraged by their desire to follow Jesus and walk in obedience to the Holy Spirit.

In addition, I meet regularly with the instructors and student supervisors. We pray together, dream together, and support one another as part of the ongoing work and ministry. All instructors have an advanced or terminal degree and are highly qualified to teach. They have a passion to follow Jesus and make disciples. While I am aware that STEP is a formal program, there is a great deal of accountability, relational equity and one-on-one mentoring that happens informally during and in between class times. I find STEP to be life-giving for myself and for others.

Finally, as a researcher, I am also an employee of LMC, and I fully support and affirm the LMC mission statement which was referenced earlier. The first line of the mission statement identifies LMC as a “Spirit-led movement to make disciples.” Understanding how disciples are called, formed and become fully mature has become a life-long focus for me and is the main reason I have chosen this particular area of study.

With the awareness of the aforementioned biases, as the researcher, I am committed to approaching the data with an open mind. I desire to see what the Holy Spirit is revealing, rather than projecting my own interpretation onto the collected material. My approach is to review the data repeatedly over a series of several weeks, mining it carefully for depth and nuances that I may not have considered in the past.

## **Narrative research and detailed description of the experience**

### **Interviewee Reflections on Personal Discipleship Experiences**

As Creswell (2009) notes, “qualitative research occurs in natural settings, where human behavior and events occur” (p. 195). This research was conducted with a specific group of individuals who were known by and had some type of established relationship with me as the researcher. These individuals also had a strong interest in the area of discipleship and leadership development. Although all of the participants were given the same questions, I did not begin the process with a predetermined theory or assumption of what would emerge from the data. Rather, my plan was to engage with and learn from each participant with the goal of identifying trends and developing a theory or theories that will position us (LMC) to continue training missional leaders for the future.

During my initial read through of the data, I was pleased by the integrity and depth of the responses. There was an overall sense that participants took the questions seriously and spent time reflecting on their answers before submitting a response. Some who responded were open enough to identify areas of struggle and tension. Others offered personal examples of questions they were wrestling with along with areas of growth and change they had experienced.

The first question I invited the participants to respond to was, “How would you say your life with God has changed in the past two years?” This question was deliberately open-ended, giving individuals the opportunity to identify anything they noticed about their spiritual journey. My hope in asking this question was to give participants the opportunity to reflect on their spiritual practices, Covid-19 challenges and opportunities, as well as their personal stories. As I read through the responses, my attention was drawn to the posture of these leaders as many indicated they were leaning in to strengthen their relationship with God. Many mentioned that their prayer life and worship of God has deepened in the past two years. They reflected on how their trust in and awareness of God has increased at the same time that their awareness of their

own weaknesses have also been exposed. Some key words that came through in the responses were: hope, faithfulness, and trust; all words that point toward a greater awareness of the movement of God in one's life.

In addition, several commented on their need to slow down and find more sustainable and healthy rhythms. Finding a more relaxed rhythm of life has positioned these leaders to strengthen their relationships with God. Rather than reading scripture for the purpose of checking it off the list of things to get done, it has now become a way to deepen their intimacy with God. Several participants who mentioned their renewed interest in reading scripture commented on the enjoyment they are finding in this new way of being with God. The recognition that we are finite beings and do not need to do it all in order to gain God's approval has been freeing for those who have been able to step back from their busy lifestyle in order to refocus and gain a fresh perspective.

One of the primary take-aways from reading the responses to this question is the passion for God, his word, prayer and desire to hear from the Holy Spirit. I found myself greatly encouraged in noticing the many who reflected on ways their spiritual walk has been transformed. My hope and prayer is that while Covid-19 had many negative consequences, may we as the church not waste the opportunities that were also present in that season.

In addition to the 17 written responses to the question above, I also was blessed to be able to meet with some people for in-person conversations. During these meetings, I had the opportunity to hear first-hand accounts of ways these individuals had experienced the work of God in their lives. All of these individuals told stories of engaging with teens, co-workers, and other people with whom they had connected and had the opportunity to share the Good News. Most of these stories are unfinished, but each evidence's a posture of journeying toward Jesus. The participants who shared stories talked of how they worked hard to maintain relationships

with these not-yet-followers of Jesus. Some schedule regular meetings and stay in touch via phone, email or text messaging, while others simply engage as opportunities arise in the midst of everyday circumstances.

In one conversation, the interviewee reflected that in the past two years, he has learned to let go of needing to control everything. He believes that the religious system was shaken during the pandemic and part of the learning curve for him as a leader has been to learn to rest in God and his plans and purposes in the midst of chaotic circumstances. He also described a sense of moving from viewing God as an angry God to learning to trust in his love and grace. If I were to choose one word to describe the posture of this individual, it would be *humility*.

The word *humility* could be used to describe the majority of respondents. The responses indicate a letting go of the need to control and a leaning in to enjoy God's presence. Several commented on the challenges they have experienced in the past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also noted that they are more strongly rooted in God than before because of those challenges. Times of suffering have a way of refining us that cannot happen when we hold too tightly to control. As the Apostle James writes,

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4, NIV).

Admitting that we as leaders have limitations is not popular in Western culture, but it is highly attractive and akin to humility in God's kingdom. These individuals have eyes that have been opened by the Spirit to see and seize divine appointments, even when it seems inconvenient.

As part of the research, I was invited to participate in three LMC district events. These events were an opportunity to hear first-hand accounts of individual journeys toward Jesus as



well as observe the interaction during the events. In all three events, the district bishop was present and highly engaged. I have engaged with these bishops in the past and am aware from previous conversations that they have a strong interest in seeing their leaders disciplined and becoming disciple makers.

Two of the events were held in person, so as the researcher, I was able to observe the participation of those present. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being high engagement, I would say that the participants were engaged at a level eight. Support for that number would be drawn from the fact that participants asked questions, engaged during small group times, were attentive during the presentation and stayed around after the meeting for fellowship. One of those events was an ongoing event consisting of eight sessions and the participation remained strong throughout the duration of that event.

The third event I attended was via an online format. The bishop was present and highly engaged but of the other ten participants, only one had their camera on so I was unable to ascertain if the other names on the screen were present or were simply listening with their cameras off. I plan to continue reaching out to this particular district and bishop in order to strengthen the relationship and encourage those leaders to move toward a greater level of engagement with some of the training tools available to them.

As the researcher, a high level of engagement indicates movement or interest in the discussion, topic or for the purpose of the group. Timing also is a key factor in engagement or lack of. Depending on one's life situation, age, family, and other responsibilities, one may have more or less time to engage. As an example, over the years, it has been observed that for students entering the STEP program, there is an average of four to seven contacts prior to the applicant actually submitting an application. Again, this is due to a variety of factors, season of life, children in the home, and financial capacity; all of which can influence the level of engagement.

## Factors Influencing Congregational Discipleship

As the researcher, I was interested to hear personal experiences and stories but also wanted to get a sense of what factors have influenced congregational discipleship in the past two years. As I reviewed the responses, three key factors were identified.

First, a number of responses were categorized by participants as outside factors that they believe have influenced their congregations. This list included: disillusioned children who have left the church for a variety of reasons, community members, post-covid residual fear and global realities, worldliness, appeals to the sensual nature, demonic ideologies, amplified political divisions and concern for sexual purity. Although respondents did not elaborate on the reasons behind listing these factors, there was a sense of heightened concern evident among the responses. One response in particular seems to capture the essence of this concern. The individual said,

I believe many if not most people in our churches do not know the difference between the kingdom of God and America. Therefore, disciple making is very difficult when Christian nationalism is dividing and threatening to destroy the church. Making disciples of Christ should be the center of Jesus's teaching about what it means to be a kingdom of God person [Interviewer notes, March 2022].

This is a fairly strong statement of one individual's opinion of current congregational life, particularly coming from an Anabaptist context. I appreciate this person's passion for the kingdom of God and the distinction between making kingdom minded disciples rather than American disciples. LMC has heard similar comments over the past two years, so this is not an isolated opinion, but those comments were outside the context of this research, so they are not included at this time. We can surmise that although not explicitly stated, much of the chaos and

political turmoil during the pandemic may have been a contributing factor for this individual's comments.

A second primary factor for many was identifying the current season as a season of change. Factors that were listed in this category included: retirement, total restructuring, vision changes, how to witness during a pandemic, adopting zoom for worship, and how to return to normal rhythms and practices following two years of disruption.

The combination of outside factors and seasons of change would appear to indicate that the majority of those who responded are experiencing a heightened awareness of the challenges facing the church at this time. Some of the factors are external, such as the volatile global situation, while others are more internal and related to the health and vitality of church life. Both have the potential for long-term impact on growing radical disciples. Focusing primarily on outside factors over which we have little or no control, can lead to becoming immobilized and fearful, neither of which should characterize followers of Jesus. Focusing mainly on internal factors can also be unhealthy and can contribute to mission drift when we fail to remember that Jesus is Lord of the church and we are to be about his mission. Living courageously and fearlessly means keeping our eyes fixed on "Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith." (Hebrews 12:2a, NIV).

A final observation that was somewhat surprising were comments related to spiritual immaturity and one leader called it a "slow-death" in the congregation. The participants who generated these comments see this as a "big problem" and do not believe that others in their congregation have the same level of awareness.

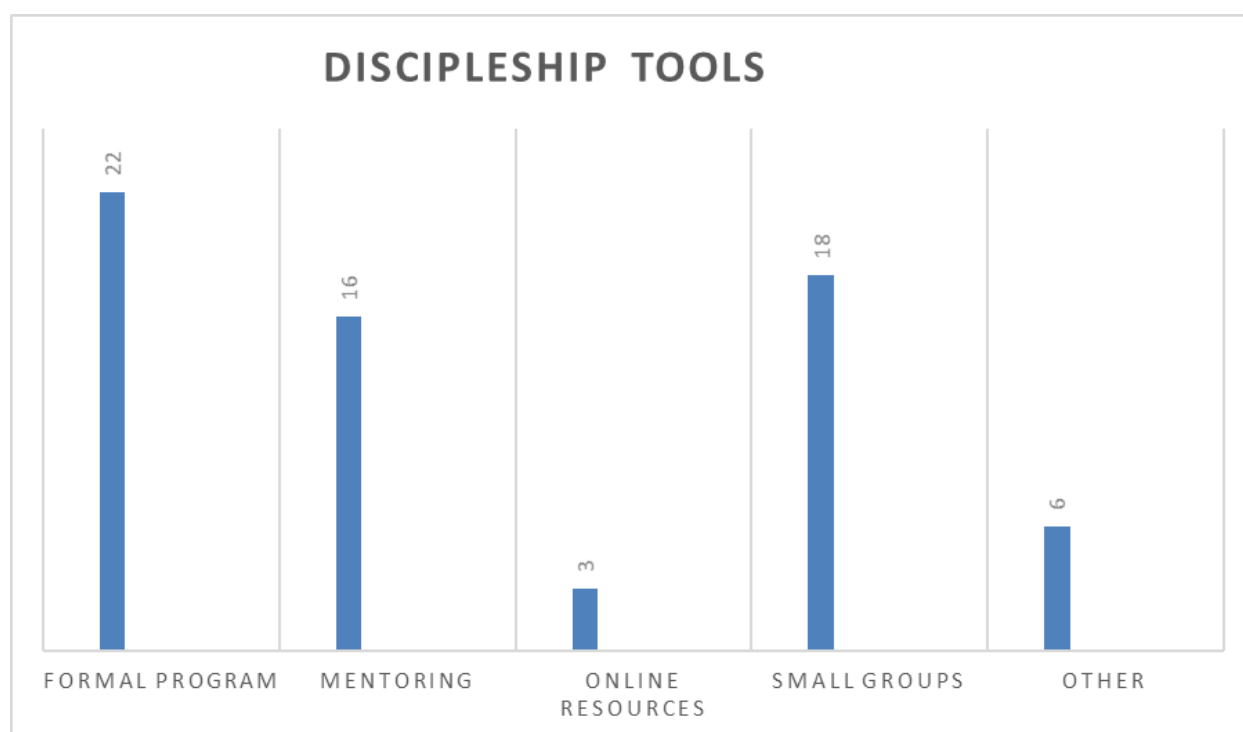
Is there hope for churches that seem to be in decline? Absolutely! Jesus is Lord of his Church and loves her tenderly. Prayer refocuses us on the Lord of the Church, the mission of the Church and our reason for being the Church. As noted from the first question respondents engaged with, the word *hope* was mentioned a number of times. Although we are in a season of

tremendous change, there is always hope because the Lord of the Church does not change. He has assured his people that “he is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8 NIV).

In summary, although there are external and internal factors that mitigate against the well-being of the church, tensions that come from being part of a body and challenges in the aftermath of a world-wide pandemic, hope remains. Even as leaders reflected on the challenges facing their congregations, the message that stood out was a focus on Jesus, his life, his words and his teaching along with the confidence that the Holy Spirit is at work among us.

#### Discipleship Methods used for Training New Leaders

As a follow up to questions about personal and congregational discipleship, participants were invited to list discipleship tools that were being utilized to identify and train emerging leaders. Below is an overview of current tools being used. [Figure 1].



The majority of respondents indicate that they rely on formal training programs as a primary discipleship tool. Formal programs include the following: STEP, an accredited 3-year training program referred to earlier in this project; SEED, a program modeled after STEP but for immigrants and those for whom English is their second language; NavPress, a 13-week course for new believers and LEAD, a 22-lesson class developed by Global Disciples. Each of these programs offer extended opportunities to strengthen one's knowledge of the Bible, grow in one's leadership skills and begin to develop a missional focus.

Along with formal programs, a strong contingent of participants indicated a thriving mentoring focus in their congregation. This focus involves calling out and inviting emerging leaders to take on roles that offer opportunities to practice and develop their leadership skills. Several respondents indicated that they make space within their congregation for new leaders to practice and develop skills while being mentored by more mature leaders. Included in some of these mentoring opportunities is training to hear and connect with the Holy Spirit as part of one's daily routine. What we bring to leadership is who we are in Christ. When an individual is surrendered to Christ, then the Holy Spirit in them can equip them for the task to which they are being called.

Three respondents noted that they are using online tools for discipleship training. One of these is a church plant that launched just prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Soon after their launch, they moved to an online format and have been able to continue meeting online for training, book clubs, pub-theology and other guided question and discussion platforms. Another participant also commented on the influence of the pandemic. This individual had been traveling several times each year to Vietnam to provide leadership training, but with the onset of the pandemic and limited travel opportunities, they moved to offering English courses online. However, these are not simply English courses for the sake of learning English, but rather, they use the Bible to teach English. Within that framework there is opportunity for discipling not-yet-

believers. These English courses have multiplied exponentially and have become a vital tool for outreach.

I have already referred to STEP, which is primarily an in-person experience. However, during the pandemic, STEP was able to move to a completely virtual experience when we were unable to meet in-person. Today, STEP maintains both an in-person and online classroom option for students and instructors.

According to the responses, small group ministry also appears to have a strong presence within LMC congregations. Groups that were listed by respondents included: men's, women's, youth, dinner church, mini retreats, discipleship groups, Sunday School classes, baptism classes, and a mobile food bank. Small groups can be a key tool for growing strong disciples. They can also become ingrown and closed. Small group leaders walk a fine line between nurturing healthy growth and keeping a missional focus. According to Acts 5:42, "day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" (NIV). The early church met corporately for worship and also in homes because both large and small group meetings were essential for the ongoing life and health of the new church. And as Jesus reminded his followers in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (NIV). Transformation takes place as we gather in His Name with the intent and purpose to focus on him and his word. Vibrant small groups are signs of hope that discipleship is happening, but caution must also be taken to not become preoccupied with self, failing to keep in the forefront the missional focus of the church.

Several participants who indicated that their congregations utilize small groups indicated their desire for increased vitality within those groups. They noted that various types of small groups have been tried but have not gained traction. Some groups have continued to meet, but little growth is evident. One interviewee commented on the drip effect, observing that when

water drips on a rock for a week, it has little or no effect. However, when water drips on the same rock for a year or more, the rock is changed by the drip. The same is true for individuals. When we expose ourselves repeatedly to the Word of God, transformation does take place.

In one LMC congregation that I interviewed, there are three different language groups using the same building. The English-speaking group meets on Sunday morning. A Laos fellowship uses the same building later in the day, and another group of immigrants uses the building later in the week. Several times each year all three groups worship and enjoy a meal together. This is an incredible opportunity to multiply resources, participate in different worship styles and get to know people from other cultures. This must be a small glimpse of what heaven is like!

### Discipleship Resources

As noted earlier, there are already a number of formal and informal resources available within the LMC context. As part of the conversation about discipleship, respondents were invited to comment on what resources they would find most helpful. Some leaders were unsure how to respond or what would be helpful.

Of the eighteen who answered this question, four mentioned digital resources and surveys that people could either work through on their own or as part of a cohort. Two mentioned the need to find and identify people who are open to being discipled. Additional responses included: Bible courses, something for new believers, resources related to marriage and sex, church planting, and baptism.

One individual mentioned they are imagining a “two-prong approach for discipleship. One prong which utilizes the method of Jesus spending time with the twelve. Secondly, the institutional church must offer classes that are required attendance for various levels of functioning in the church.” This individual referenced the passage in 1 John where John refers to children, young adults and fathers and the desire to offer resources at all levels.

In analyzing the various comments, it is evident that resources are needed, but there was a lack of consensus on what those resources should be. To summarize, the primary discipleship tools mentioned were small groups, formal training programs and mentoring. I believe all have a place in church life and will be effective discipleship tools for different segments of the population.

### Calling and Equipping of New Leaders within the LMC Context

For any congregation or denomination engaged in making disciples, it becomes essential to train and equip new leaders. Indications by the respondents reveal a desire to continue to call and equip emerging leaders. Several responses noted that their current leadership team regularly looks at the congregation to call out those with leadership potential. As noted earlier, the primary training tools for equipping these leaders are formal programs, mentoring and small group training. One of the questions invited participants to reflect on ways that the STEP program has impacted them personally or their leadership development. Of the 18 who responded to the question, 15 indicated that either they or their leaders have participated in the STEP program. The other three commented that they are aware of STEP but have not yet used it as a tool to train leaders.

Of the 15 who do utilize STEP as a training tool, there were a range of comments such as “STEP is my go-to training for our district churches. I am a firm believer in STEP. It is serving us well.” Another individual commented that “we are sold out on using STEP to train and raise up new leaders.” A STEP instructor noted that “I teach for STEP and it has really sustained me as a leader.” A prior student responded that “it has completely changed me and how I relate to God and his ministry that he has called me to.”

STEP has and continues to be a positive tool to inspire, encourage and train leaders. As indicated, it also has a positive impact on the instructors as students and instructors engage and learn from one another. One respondent commented that “As I look at myself before and after



STEP the biggest change I see is my desire and ability to wait on God. Working with God in this way has taken the weight off my shoulders. This is the opposite of what comes naturally to me. It is definitely the work of the Spirit.” Another individual noted that “STEP was a blessing to everyone who participated and provided us with some of our highest caliber leaders.”

There are currently several LMC congregations that send one or more students to STEP each year. These congregations offer prayer and financial support to each student. In addition, by sending the individual(s) to STEP, they are affirming God’s call on their lives as leaders.

However, as indicated, STEP is only a tool. Some people are not able to commit to a three-year training program. Others do not have the financial resources to cover the cost of tuition. And, STEP is primarily for those for whom English is their first language. Some of the required reading is available in Spanish, but since STEP is homework driven, it can be challenging to complete all the reading and homework in English if that is not one’s primary language.

Informal but ongoing training opportunities are also available for the many Spanish speaking congregations within LMC. Currently, approximately 50 percent of LMC is composed of ethnic groups other than Anglo. A large portion of that other 50 percent is made up of a group of Spanish speaking congregations, many of whom are part of Shalom Council, a Spanish-speaking district within LMC. During the interview process, I spoke with one of the supervisors in the Shalom Council. In the 50 years since its inception, the Council has birthed three training programs. First is their Bible Institute. This is primarily for new church members. During this training, they review the Mennonite Confession of Faith, take classes in Old and New Testament, Anabaptist theology, church planting and classes that speak to the posture of the leader’s heart.

As members mature, they move to the second level of training called Christian Worker Program (CWP). This training takes place three times each year. The purpose of the CWP is to equip and teach new leaders. Pastors in the local congregations recommend emerging leaders for

entrance into this training. Topics covered include administration, teaching, Anabaptist history and theology, peace and justice, and the life of Jesus. Much of their resourcing comes from a local organization called *LeadersServe*, whose primary purpose is to “serve the leaders who shape the world” (Byler, n.d.).

The third level of training is continuing education classes for pastors and supervisors. These training sessions are held four times each year. The purpose is to build and strengthen relationships among pastors and supervisors and to teach, encourage and equip the leaders. Times of training include fellowship, games, and relevant pastoral care issues.

During the interview, I asked the Shalom Council supervisor if their training was keeping ahead of the demand for leaders. In response, he shared several stories. At a recent (February 2022) Christian Worker training, pastors were asked to bring emerging leaders with them. The pastors who attended brought seventy emerging leaders for training! His response to my question was a resounding YES, the Council has been richly blessed with new leaders. As a supervisor in his district, he has stepped back from some local congregational leadership roles in order to make space for new leaders to lead. His congregation is currently in the process of planting four additional congregations with a fifth on the horizon. And, he has leaders ready to step into positions of leadership for these church plants!

### **Summary of Findings from Survey and Interview Responses**

One of the key findings from the interviews is that there appears to be some distance between what the leaders are experiencing and where they perceive their congregants to be. Leaders were able to articulate clearly their personal spiritual growth and their enjoyment of spending time with the Lord. They also reflected on their increased sensitivity to the Holy Spirit that has grown out of struggles and challenges of the past two years. As a result of the challenges leaders have faced, they have learned that their weakness is made strong in Christ’s strength. However, from the comments received about congregational life, it would seem that those “in the

pews” are still in the midst of the challenges whereas the leaders have been able, with God’s help, to move through the wall and have emerged stronger and with deeper faith and trust in Almighty God to sustain them.

Care will need to be taken to connect with and bring congregants along, equipping them to be able to also move through the wall of challenges before them. However, from the comments made by participants, the majority of leaders appear to have been able to maintain forward movement in the midst of extenuating circumstances.

Each time we move through the wall, there is a new, deeper grace from which we live and serve. We become more aware of God and the movement of His Spirit as our focus turns outward toward others. We may need to return to the wall a number of times in our spiritual journey, but each time, having previously experienced God’s sustaining love and grace at the wall, we trust him more deeply to move us through the next time.

As mentioned earlier, there is every indication that leaders are leaning into and experiencing God in new ways. Leaders commented that “his love poured out to all of us is hard to believe and we have discovered a beauty in walking with Jesus during painful times that can’t be experienced any other way.” Another individual commented that “there is a reality of his presence with me that is maybe more profound than it has ever been.” These and other similar comments appear to demonstrate a posture of the leaders that is God-ward. Jesus reminded his followers in Matthew 7:7,8, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (NIV). His word tells us that *everyone* who asks will receive and we know that “the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chronicles 16:9 NIV). God rewards those who earnestly seek him and his ways.

A number of comments indicated that leaders are looking to train new leaders. As

mentioned, Shalom Council has a strategy for how to identify and train emerging leaders in their congregations. Anglo congregations are doing this, but at a slower rate. This is an opportunity to learn from one another and to simultaneously increase cultural competency.

According to the responses received, formal and informal training opportunities are both bearing fruit. As formal training programs, STEP and SEED are being utilized to equip leaders. With any programmatic approach, there are advantages and disadvantages. STEP and SEED are both multi-year programs, requiring a lengthy commitment of time and resources. While SEED is poised to graduate their first cohort this spring, STEP has a longer history and has graduated over 150 students since its inception in 2004. A sense of accountability is embedded in these programs due to the homework component and the grades that are submitted as part of the accreditation process.

While the *Discovery* program was not mentioned by any of the individuals interviewed, it has also had a significant impact on those who have committed to walk through the discipleship process, with hundreds having been trained, some of whom have gone on to graduate from STEP. However, many in LMC leadership are aware that even with these vital training programs, we have not been able to keep up with the demand for leaders within Anglo congregations.

Informal training also has a place in the life of the church. Small groups and mentoring opportunities are vital as individual discipling tools. Again, this requires a commitment of time. Since small groups and mentoring can offer a much more intimate experience, and since most of these groups meet more frequently than do formal programs, there is increased opportunity for ongoing accountability between participants. However, without a clear vision or purpose, small groups can quickly become self-serving, failing to fulfill their reason for being. Setting the boundaries and articulating vision at the onset of the group with frequent reminders along the way, can be critical to maintaining healthy growing groups who are clear about their mission and purpose.

In summary, data indicates that leaders are “enjoying God” and finding a “beauty in walking with Jesus during painful times.” These and other similar responses seem to indicate a new depth of relationship in their journey as disciples of Jesus. Leaders took time to honestly assess and offer reflections on where they are in their walk with God. Some offered reasons for why they are where they are, such as this comment from a participant, “As a church guy, I have been challenged consistently over the past two years to relook at the way we call people to deeper faith experiences.” It appears that some leaders have had their assumptions challenged and have been blessed with Holy Spirit imagination to envision new ways for disciple making.

Leaders also recognized that there are external and internal factors that are influencing the spiritual life of those in their congregations. Overall, leaders appear to be at a different place spiritually than where they believe their congregants are. However, leaders appear hopeful, more attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit and note “an increased awareness of dependence on God.” For leaders to move through their challenges and then be able to lead others is a key piece of discipleship.

In addition, the data indicates a place for both formal and informal training within congregations and at the conference level. Informal training such as mentoring, can often be more flexible than formal programs like STEP that must meet certain program requirements in order to qualify for accreditation. Both Anglo and non-Anglo congregations have programs in place to raise up and disciple leaders and both are reaching a certain segment of the population.

Additional resourcing is needed at all levels of congregational life. Raising the current level of awareness about what is already available is a critical step. Some respondents indicated a desire to develop additional online resources which can be accessed from anywhere in the world. One individual said, “we could dream of material in each level to offer our disciples to graduate from in order to form fully devoted followers of Jesus.” That comment reflects many others that

were made as leaders are wanting to equip those in their congregations.

Below is the completed chart from chapter 2 which now includes the data review.

<i>Discipleship</i>	<i>History/Theology</i>	<i>Data</i>
<i>Jesus is Lord</i>	Modernity – individualism	Leader/follower disjunction: leaders leaning in to relationship with Jesus; followers being influenced by the world
	Church/State/Emperor/Pope – Caesar is lord	
	Follow me as I follow my Father	
<i>God is relational</i>	Holy Spirit is our helper	Dependence on Holy Spirit
	Practices include: Bible reading, community, believer's baptism, prayer, repentance	Practices include: Bible reading, prayer, solitude
<i>God's mission must be the mission of the Church</i>	Domesticated view of Jesus during Christendom	Limited mention of mission
	Mission got confused with structure and hierarchy	Dismantling of structures and idols

Key to the entire discipleship journey and woven throughout the narrative is the fact that Jesus is Lord, God is relational and God's mission must be the mission of the church.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Introduction of the Emerging Theory**

The overarching purpose of this study was to address the need for a leadership formation training platform for the church leader based on a Jesus-centered, Anabaptist focused, kingdom approach to discipleship. In this chapter, conclusions have been drawn from the secondary and primary research sections of this project. The benefit of a grounded theory approach to research is giving space for the data to inform what theory(ies) will emerge. To that end, a theory drawn from the research has been suggested. As a theory, there are potential applications for the broader Church community, beyond the original intended audience of anabaptists. In addition, avenues for applying the theory in a specific 21st century Anabaptist context are offered. A review of church history integrated with recent data from church leaders has given birth to the following theory and supporting conclusions.

A review of the biblical narrative leads us to conclude that Jesus's approach to discipleship was countercultural. For example, Jewish teachers were approached by individuals who wanted to be their disciples. In contrast, Jesus invited and chose his disciples after spending a night in prayer. In addition, the purpose of being a disciple of Jewish rabbi was to learn the Torah. Jesus invited his disciples to a relationship, not to a program. There was a deeply intentional relational and communal aspect to Jesus's approach. This was counter-cultural then and remains so now.

History has shown that the influences of Christendom and modernity have undermined Jesus's invitational approach to a relational discipleship. In an attempt to return to the emphasis on

Jesus-centered discipleship, anabaptism, as part of the reform movement, began to dismantle some of the trappings and structures that were associated with Christendom and the emerging Modernity. Anabaptism, more than any other, responded to Jesus's countercultural approach, advocating for and retaining a commitment to a Jesus-centered, communal discipleship. This theory will be clarified in greater detail in the following pages.

### **Supporting Conclusions**

A consistent theme throughout the project is the awareness that God is always on mission to restore relationships with and among all his creation. This redemptive mission is evident throughout the Biblical narrative, culminating in the sacrificial death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit work in community to accomplish the redemptive mission. The redemptive mission of God has been obscured at times during the history of the Church as the influences of Christendom and modernity, in particular, offered a domesticated, tame view of Jesus, leading to a weak, anemic discipleship.

Some of the Radical Reformers found themselves at odds with this view, instead advocating for a return to a costly discipleship rooted in the understanding that Jesus IS Lord and he is neither weak nor tame! This costly discipleship included a high view of scripture, Bible study, prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit.

As demonstrated by the research, this turning from the influences of modernity continues among followers of Jesus today who are passionately committed to mission under the Lordship of Christ. The countercultural anabaptist movement and resulting reforms existed centuries prior to the influences of modernity and post-modernity. [For more information, see article on *Post-modernity and Anabaptism* under further research section.]

Data identified that a majority of the respondents were actively pursuing relationships with God as part of this mission. Those respondents reflected on their personal discipleship



journey and the enjoyment and delight they found in their walk with Jesus. Time spent with the Lord was resulting in a deeper level of trust as leaders recognized their own areas of weakness and depended on their times of prayer and scripture reading for guidance and strengthening during difficult times, including the recent Covid-19 pandemic. As one participant noted, “the religious system was shaken during the pandemic”, leading to his realization that he is not and does not need to be in control. As another leader told me, “The illiterate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who are unable to unlearn, dismantle and relearn.” Unlearning and dismantling are a part of the repentance process that moves us from casual followers to costly discipleship.

Closely connected to this observation is the awareness that the experience of Christendom, the Enlightenment, two world wars, and resulting economic depression have impacted the way many Americans think about the church today. In his book *Missional Church*, Guder (1998) supports this observation when writes that “as heirs of Christendom, we face a particular struggle in regard to the rule of Christ made manifest in the structures of the church” (p. 228). This continued dependence on professional clergy and hierarchical structures continue to affect ways in which the church responds to God’s mission for his world. This dependence can create distance between clergy and congregants. In turn, this has deeply impacted the way we understand discipleship. Guder (1998) goes on to reflect that

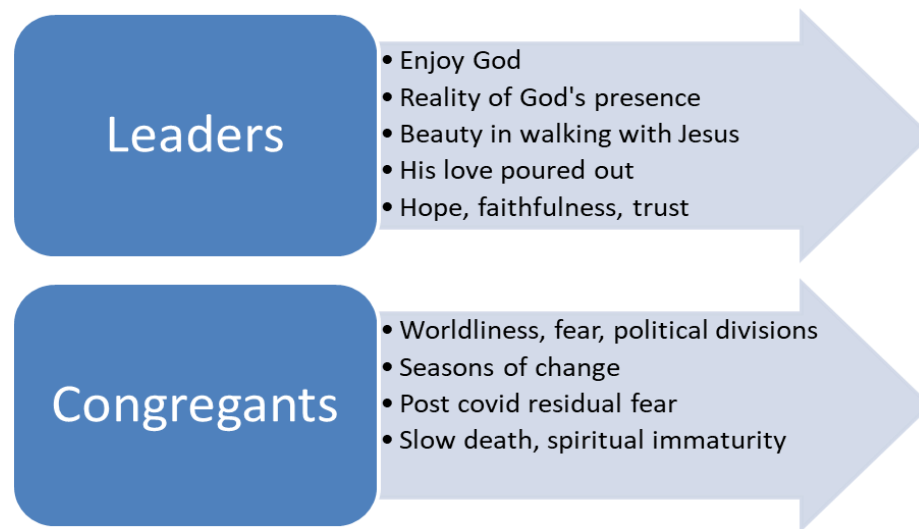
the reign of Christ is jeopardized when any organizational structure becomes an end in itself. When the visible church is primarily concerned with its image, its growth, its success, and its security, then it is ripe for conversion to the reign of Christ, who lays bare and sets aside all these idols (p. 229).

Guder is suggesting that there is hope when these idols are exposed, some of which happened during the pandemic. Research has shown that times of persecution and crisis can be a catalyst for deepening one’s discipleship journey. This was noticed both in the primary and

secondary research as, throughout history, the church has undergone times of intense challenge and persecution that have dismantled false ideologies and exposed shaky foundations. Current research supported this theory as leaders coming through the past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic reflected those challenges experienced during the pandemic led to deeper trust and faith in God for wisdom and guidance.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, some of the shaky scaffolding that discipleship and mission was built upon was exposed and even dismantled. This was a gift in disguise. A number of those who participated in the interviews and survey commented on the blessing it was to be able to return to a simpler lifestyle. A case in point is the comment by one individual who said, “I’ve enjoyed slowing down and sitting with scripture rather than ticking Bible reading off as a task.” Much of American Christianity is consumed with bigger, better and more. Simplicity as a spiritual discipline is a kingdom principle that removes us from the tyranny of the urgent, making space to be with Jesus and learn from him.

Further, research demonstrated that leaders and congregants were at significantly different places on the discipleship journey. While leaders identified as having a posture of leaning into Jesus and his word through prayer and personal practices, they identified their congregations as fearful, depending on worldly ideologies and being influenced by political pressures. See Figure 2 below for comparison of responses.

**Figure 2.**

Although drawn as parallel tracks, the reality is that if the distance between leaders and congregations is allowed to continue, they may not continue as parallel tracks but become oppositional in the long term. Some of this distance and oppositional behavior was observed during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic as leaders and followers at times found themselves at different places on issues related to government mandates and political pressures.

Surprisingly, the majority of leaders who were interviewed expressed a very positive outlook and gave no indication that they were considering stepping away from leadership or ministry. This optimistic trend was not present in some of my conversations outside of this research and is not supported by current research statistics. It has been estimated that as high as thirty-three percent of all church leaders are or will step away from ministry, partially as a result of stressors experienced during the pandemic. This figure appears consistent across denominational lines. This is a factor that will need to be watched closely in the coming years.

As noted earlier, an unexpected observation from the data showed a difference between factors that were influencing the spiritual formation of leaders and factors that were influencing the spiritual formation of congregants. One possible reason for this difference is that during the

pandemic, leaders were forced to make hard and even unpopular decisions related to how the church would or would not continue to function during the days of the Covid-19 shutdown. Congregants on the other hand, were recipients of the decisions, not the decision makers. Hence, it is possible that congregants were more influenced by the media, politics and overall hype while the leaders, as indicated by the responses, turned inward to the secret place of seeking guidance from God. It is also possible that as recipients of the many decisions that were being handed down during the pandemic, these individuals felt a sense of loss of power and freedom which may have also influenced who, what and how they responded to clergy and others in places of authority. This is an observation that should continue to be watched as the world emerges more fully from the pandemic.

A second unexpected finding from the data was that a minimal number of respondents offered any comments related to mission. If mission is a key value and is embedded in the DNA of church life, this absence is surprising. There are several possible reasons for this omission. First, it may be that the questions did not lend themselves or encourage respondents to offer feedback on that aspect. Secondly, it could also be that during the past two years there were a number of distractions and leaders were primarily focused on figuring out how to do church during a pandemic, to the neglect of mission. A third, and possibly a more insidious option is that we have an incorrect understanding of mission. For example, some in the church have abdicated mission to a team or committee whose primary responsibility is to plan outreach events. For Jesus, all of life was about being on mission. The only mission the church has is God's mission.

Finally, research demonstrates that programmatic approaches to discipleship are somewhat limited in their effectiveness and reach. As God on mission, Jesus invited people to a relationship. People are searching for ways to deepen their relationship with Jesus. They earnestly desire to have an intimate relationship with him, however they are not entirely sure

how to get there. They want Jesus, but all too often, the American Church has offered a program instead of a way to deepen their relationship with Christ. An emphasis on individualism in the Western Church has contributed to a weak discipleship mentality. Jesus always taught in community, whether with his three closest disciples, the twelve, the seventy or the crowd. While faith is personal, it is also communal, and we grow best in community with others who are also on the journey.

This emphasis on individualism may, in part, have its roots in rationalism. In chapter two, I discuss the move from several families living in close proximity to greater and greater levels of segregation. In past decades, the community was responsible to help train, correct and nurture the children in the faith and life. Church and school worked in tandem to teach Biblical principles and support what was being taught in the home. In much of American culture today, families are separated not only by distance, but by beliefs, politics and religion. Loss of community has contributed to a weak discipleship as families lack support that was previously present.

The research findings demonstrate that, at least for LMC, the formal discipleship programs are effective for those who participate, primarily because they incorporate a strong relational and community component into the program. This relational piece has several components including nurturing relationships with God, self, and others. Mentoring in small groups or one-on-one has also been proven to be an effective discipleship tool within LMC congregations.

## **Recommendations**

The first recommendation is that we identify ways to return to the *missio Dei* of God's redemptive purposes for his world, which focuses our vision and purpose. This is what it means to live as countercultural followers of Jesus. Freeman, McClendon & Velloso (1999), support this counter cultural emphasis when they write that "the hermeneutical perspective of the baptist

vision is not just a set of ideas or doctrines. It is a way of living: God's people with an open Bible, ready to follow" (p. 7). This is truly an Anabaptist way of living, as we read scripture through the lens of Jesus and view the world through his eyes. This is incarnational living - a way of becoming the message and living the mission. And mission, as McClendon (1986) says in his volume on *Systematic Theology*, is "understood not as an attempt to control history for the ends we believe to be good, but as the responsibility to witness to Christ - and accept the suffering that witness entails" (p. 28).

Secondly, revising our theology of suffering can be beneficial for disciples of Jesus. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (NIV). A vital aspect of the mission of Jesus was to suffer for the redemption of the world. As Radical Reformers, those early anabaptists suffered greatly for their faith. American Christianity has, by and large, lost the missional aspect embodied in suffering. Early on in this project, I referred to a conversation with several Ethiopian believers who came to know Jesus during a time of intense persecution. Their experience and understanding of how suffering can be a purifying tool is often lacking in American churches. Listening to stories of those who have walked through times of persecution can be a way of reforming our own hermeneutic of suffering and how deeply it is tied to costly discipleship.

Finally, it will be vital for Anabaptists to regain what made them distinctive in the first place. In his book, *The Anabaptist Vision*, author Harold Bender (1944) writes that "the Anabaptist vision included three major points of emphasis; first, a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship; second, a new conception of the church as a brotherhood; and third, a new ethic of love and nonresistance" (p. 20). These major points are, in reality, countercultural. A return to these distinctives embodies the key tenets of this study which are:

Jesus is Lord, God is on mission to redeem all of creation and the fact that it is God's nature to be and live in relationship.

The *missio Dei* represents God's active participation in the redemption of the world.

Christians do not bring the *missio Dei*, nor is there more than one *missio Dei*. The *missio Dei* respects all recipients of the gospel as it identifies with them in the world (Gibbs & Bolger, (2005), p. 53).

Anabaptists are no strangers to what it means to live as countercultural followers of Jesus.

Recovering this mandate to not be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds will enable us to live as authentic disciples of Jesus on his mission for the world.

### **Conclusions Specific for the LMC Context**

Turning from the broader Anabaptist context, we move to a specific group of Anabaptists known as LMC (Lancaster Mennonite Conference), a group that has been referenced previously in this project. This is the community within which the primary research was conducted. This group of anabaptists are seeking to live as countercultural followers of Jesus as a conference and within their local contexts. The LMC mission statement's first tenet is to be a "Spirit-led movement that makes disciples." For LMC this means acknowledging Jesus as Lord and being on mission with God. The conclusions that follow have been drawn from this specific context for this group of churches.

Envisioning a missional future for LMC as a conference and individual congregations will require nimbleness, dependence on the Holy Spirit and the mobilization of every person. As has been noted, the LMC mission statement is calling for the conference to become a "Spirit-led movement that makes disciples, mobilizes every member and multiplies faith communities." In order to make this mission a reality and to develop a leadership formation training platform that is based on a Jesus-centered, Anabaptist focused kingdom approach to discipleship, as part of my grounded theory, I am proposing the following.

First, I am recommending a decadal plan that would include at minimum a two-year focus on each phrase of the mission statement. Each aspect of the plan would include applicable resources, either developed by LMC or drawn from the broader Evangelical community. These resources would be disseminated throughout the conference in a multi-step process. Each LMC bishop would be trained to use the resources. In turn, they would train the pastors in their district who in turn would train those in the local congregations with the understanding that this mandate is for everyone, not a select few leaders. In her book, *Followership*, Barbara Kellerman (2008), writes of the need to educate not only leaders, but also followers.

As it stands now, for all the care and feeding we provide our leaders and managers, followers get nearly none. As a result, those of us who are followers – which most of us are most of the time – generally have not much impetus and even less of an idea of how to harness our own considerable resources (pp. 239-240).

Education for followers is only part of the solution. Followers need to see and be given the opportunity to walk with leaders as part of their spiritual journey and training.

Training resources could include some of the following listed below. This is not an exhaustive list, merely demonstrative of possible resources. Additional resources will need to be developed along the way, but I do not believe LMC should wait to begin this journey until all resources are in place.

1. An overview of the Biblical story and how each individual is part of this story.
2. Anabaptist distinctives, many of which are already available in the *Confession of Faith* booklet.
3. Classes in spiritual formation, prayer practices and mentoring.
4. Participants will need to understand what it means to be “Spirit-led”.
5. Church planting or church in third spaces.
6. Technology resources.
7. Marriage and family resources.
8. *Discovery*.
9. Resources related to living as a multicultural community of faith.



In addition to discipleship resources, training leaders for how to develop close interpersonal relationships for sharing life and recruiting small groups to explore this together will be needed to raise the level of awareness. These strategies could include the use of various types of media including the LMC website, video, blogs, and an online platform for advertising and dissemination of the resources. In addition, bookmarks, flyers and other print materials can be developed and distributed in various languages.

Metrics will need to be developed that will measure not simply numbers, but also determine spiritual growth and how disciples are being made. How do we transition from counting numbers in the pew to measuring transformed lives? New metrics will need to be developed that will be in keeping with the model Jesus used of the three, the twelve, the seventy and the crowds.

Resources will need to be allocated to support these initiatives some of which may come from the LMC office budget. However, it will be critical for buy-in that each district and congregation also contribute resources so that this is not simply a top-down endeavor.

In conjunction with the decadal plan, as discussed in a previous chapter, formal and informal programs are both being used effectively in local congregations as disciple-making tools. Since both types of programs are bearing fruit, my recommendation is to continue utilizing both types. However, it will be helpful to share stories of how and why these types of initiatives are being used. Making space within LMC structures to tell the stories will offer a source of encouragement to those in the program and to those who are looking for disciple-making tools. In addition to sharing stories, finding ways to promote these resources and translating them into various languages in or to make them readily accessible both online and in paper form will also be beneficial for LMC congregations.

### **Recommendations Specific to the LMC STEP Leadership Training Program**

The recommendations that follow drill down deeper into the LMC context, targeting a specific leadership training program known as STEP (Study and Training for Effective Pastoral ministry). This training tool has been referenced earlier in this project and a number of those who participated in the online survey and in person interviews are also involved in the STEP program either as students, alumni or as instructors. Currently STEP serves as the primary tool for training and equipping leaders for ministry within the LMC group of congregations. While not the only tool, STEP does have a track record of graduating students who are prepared to live counterculturally within their specific ministry contexts. In addition, the classes address issues this project has been wrestling with including Jesus is Lord, God is relational, and God's mission must be the mission of the church. The mission of STEP supports the overall LMC mission statement and offers a viable training tool for disciples of Jesus.

As indicated, STEP continues to be a primary formal training tool within the LMC context. The reasons for the effectiveness of this program are numerous including committed and qualified instructors, support of student supervisors and commitment of congregations and districts to provide financial support for students. In addition, STEP utilizes a variety of teaching tools and students interact with a number of instructors during their tenure. Classes are held in person with students remaining with the same cohort for the duration of the program. Relationships that are developed over the course of three years grow strong and often last long after graduation. Class sessions include lecture, discussion, prayer support, small group work and space for questions.

In addition, as part of the requirement for graduation, all year three students must complete a missional project. Students are given few parameters and are permitted to be as creative as possible in preparing for this project. The missional project must be done outside of the local church setting. In many ways, this missional project is a way of reigniting the prophetic

imagination and creativity that is part of God's image in each individual. This project has resulted in numerous expressions of church taking place in third spaces as a way of reaching out to the local community. Gibbs & Bolger (2005) note that "it's one of the core tasks of leadership to help the community to dream again" (p. 188).

In reflecting on the history of STEP and potential for the future, I recommend the following. First, offer annual seminars or refresher courses for STEP alumni. This will serve several purposes. It will enable and encourage alumni to stay connected to the larger body as well as challenge them to continue to practice what they learned while in class. STEP currently offers courses in preaching and teaching. I recommend offering Preaching 201 and Teaching 201. I also recommend classes on soul care, prayer practices such as Lectio Divina, Visio Divina, Prayer of Examen (see appendix for examples of prayer practices) and relevant pastoral care topics. This annual or semi-annual gathering could be a one-day event that includes worship, plenary speakers and seminars. It should also provide time for fellowship and relationship building.

Several years ago, STEP was approached by leaders from the Mennonite Church in Tanzania who were interested in being part of the program. Due to a variety of challenges, at that time we were unable to accept students from Tanzania into the program. I would recommend that STEP invite and financially support one student from Tanzania to join the program. This should be a respected church leader who is fluent in English. This leader could then take elements of the STEP program and implement them in their local congregations for training. Due to cultural and language differences, it does not seem feasible or wise to simply move toward a full integration of the program into a different cultural setting.

As a formal program, STEP has proven to be an effective tool for training leaders. However, as noted earlier, one size does not fit all. STEP has limitations and is not keeping up with the need to train leaders for all LMC congregations. As such, encouraging the many

emerging grass roots initiatives and mentoring opportunities that are present within LMC congregations is also critical for continuing to disciple and train leaders. These grass roots initiatives are more nimble, less costly, and more flexible in meeting times, duration of training and less curriculum driven. One of the disadvantages to these initiatives is the potential for the training to be driven by individual personal preferences rather than Jesus-centered and biblically rooted. This too can be an exercise in learning to trust and rely on the Holy Spirit to lead and not needing those in leadership to control what is happening.

In summary, the key tenets of this study are: Jesus is Lord, God is on mission to redeem all of creation and the fact that it is God's nature to be and live in relationship. The earlier review of church history revealed the way forward for those committed to becoming radical Jesus followers. Becoming a committed disciple is a life-long journey and cannot be done in isolation. We were created for community and to be in relationship with God and others. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12, we are a body, and all parts are needed for healthy functioning. The message must remain the same, but contextualization of methods and re-imagining new tools will be needed as we continue to work to fulfill God's mission of redemption for the world he created and loves with an everlasting love.

### **For Further Research**

As with any project, there are limitations of time and resources. In addition, as the project progresses, additional questions and considerations come to light. This was the case for this project. Considerations for further research are listed below.

1. In reference to the discrepancy that was noted between leaders and followers, a follow up study could include research related to similarities and differences between church leaders and attendees and the ongoing implications if the findings demonstrate disparities between the two. This area of study could focus solely on anabaptist groups, however it could also be applied more broadly and also include a cross-cultural component.

2. A repeated theme throughout this project was living as countercultural disciples of Jesus. Fleshing out practical ways this is done in various cultures would be a fascinating continuation of this study. This may include a deep dive into Romans 12:1, 2 where Paul writes that believers should not be conformed to this world.
3. Another option would be to look more closely at the influences of Christendom, Modernity and Post-modernism and how they have impacted or overlapped with Anabaptist theology and practice.

As a researcher, if I were to do additional research in this area, below are some of the ways I would focus additional study.

1. Revise the data collection process by:
  - a) Modifying the questions to include questions specific to mission.
  - b) As the researcher, attend more in-person district events and meetings.
  - c) Create a budget for travel expenses in order to make in-person interviews a priority.
2. Spend additional time with the broader Anabaptist community learning about their discipling process and programs.
3. Include research that relates specifically to children and youth and how they are being disciplined to ensure that the faith is being passed on to the next generation.
4. Consider how education is influencing spiritual formation of children and youth and identify possible long-term implications.
5. Possible resources include:
  - a) *Baptist Roots* by C. Freeman, J.W. McClendon Jr., and C.R. Velloso da Silva. 1999. Published by Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA.
  - b) *Ethics: Systematic Theology Volume 1* by J.W. McClendon Jr. 1986. Published by Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.

- c) *The Earth is the Lord's: A Narrative History of Lancaster Mennonite Conference* by John Ruth. 2001. Published by Herald Press, Scottdale, PA.
- d) Utilize resources available at Mennonite Life, formerly known as Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society. Located at Millstream Road, Lancaster PA.
- e) <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/spring-2001/anabaptists-and-postmodernity-anabaptist-theology-face>

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**APPENDIX 1****Interview and Survey Questions**

## Question #1

How would you say your life with God has changed in the past two years?

## Question #2

What factors are most influencing you or your congregation in this season?

## Question #3

What type of discipleship training or mentoring is currently being offered in your congregation or district?

## Question #4

How are new leaders being called, encouraged and trained?

## Question #5

Are you familiar with the STEP program? If so, what type of impact has it had on you or your congregation?

### Question #6

What type of discipleship resources would be most helpful to you or your congregation?

Note: Questions #7 and #8 were not utilized as it was determined that they were not as applicable to the research as had been anticipated.

## APPENDIX 2

### STEP Learning Outcomes

1. The pastor/ministry leader will have experienced and be committed to ongoing personal and spiritual formation through worship and prayer, interaction with the Scriptures, practice of spiritual disciplines, being accountable, and walking in the Spirit.
2. The pastor/ministry leader will be equipped for and committed to increasing health and godliness in character, marriage and family relationship, sexual expression, and in relationships with friends, colleagues, and others in the body of Christ.
3. The pastor/ministry leader will have discerned and humbly claimed a call to ministry, increasing in awareness of personal gifts, strengths and limitations.
4. The pastor/ministry leader will be developing a framework for making moral, ethical and just decisions according to God's standards.
5. The pastor/ministry leader has a deep and growing knowledge of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments and is able to understand, interpret and apply the Bible to life situations.
6. The pastor/ministry leader understands how Anabaptists learn from the 2000-year story of the Christian faith, and contribute perspectives through a distinct identity as described in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.
7. The pastor/ministry leader preaches effective sermons, teaches transforming classes, and plans inspiring worship in both congregational and community contexts so that Scripture shapes the life and witness of the congregation.
8. The pastor/ministry leader is learning to build strong communities of Jesus in the current cultural, generational environment, creating teams for ministry and equipping others for the work that God has called them to.
9. The pastor/ministry leader leads the congregation administratively, working with congregational and denominational structures to help the congregation be effective and flourish in God's purposes for the church.

10. The pastor/ministry leader helps the congregation become a witnessing community that leads seekers to believe and newcomers to belong; developing a vision for church planting and a cross-cultural mission among all people.

11. The pastor/ministry leader provides pastoral care for persons of all ages through every life stage and every life experience.

12. The pastor/ministry leader is developing skills in conflict transformation and in the ability to honor and promote biblical standards for justice and compassion in the church and in the world.

## APPENDIX 3

### **Lectio Divina (divine reading)**

- 1) Retreat (separatio): Find a quiet spot where you can spend 15-20 minutes of uninterrupted time with God and his Word. Ask God's Holy Spirit to speak to you through the Scripture, revealing truths about himself and yourself.
- 2) Read (lectio): Pick a short section of Scripture (5-15 verses). Read the passage aloud, slowly and prayerfully two to three times. Ask God to highlight a word or phrase as you read. When something seems to stand out to you, trust that God is bringing that to you for a reason.
- 3) Reflect (meditatio): Take that word or phrase and meditate on it. The psalmist challenges us to meditate on God's word "day and night" (Ps 1:2). Look at it from all different perspectives. Why might God have brought this to your attention? What might God want to say to you? What are you thinking/feeling/sensing/imagining about this word or phrase?
- 4) Respond (oratio): Talk to God about this. Thank him for speaking to you. Ask him to apply this truth to your life. Take time to listen to God. Remember that prayer is a dialogue not a monologue.
- 5) Rest (contemplatio): Sit quietly in God's loving presence. Be with God as you might be with a friend sitting around a campfire after a day of hiking. Words may be unnecessary. Be present with God without an agenda.
- 6) Resolve (incarnatio): God's word becomes flesh in us as we live out what we have received in Lectio. God changes us and shapes us for a purpose. What happens to us as we participate in Lectio should permeate our lives in our day-today world. Paul tells us that being shaped by his Word is so that we "may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:17).



## APPENDIX 4

### Visio Divina: Praying with Images

by Doreen Miller (used by permission)

Visio divina is praying with images such as paintings, photographs, drawings, icons, or sculptures. A picture may indeed be “worth a thousand words.” God has often used visual images to communicate truth. Both Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles had visions and dreams. And Yahweh commanded the Israelites to carve and weave images of cherubim for the cover of the ark of atonement and for the tabernacle curtains.

Though early Christians prohibited graven images of God the Father, they painted and carved Old Testament stories and representations of God the Son, particularly in the catacombs. After Christianity was legalized, Christian art became useful for teaching an illiterate population. Stained glass windows, mosaics, carvings and even the architecture of cathedrals proclaimed the biblical story and aided in worship.

In the Bible, poetry, music, dance, story-telling, and art are all used in worship, and all touch and transform the deep, inarticulate places in human hearts. Visio divina encourages a return to one of these earlier forms of learning and worship. In addition, visio divina may be a corrective to the influence of our culture’s increasingly shallow, fast-paced visual orientation. Pausing to see more deeply trains us to be more attentive to the presence and work of God below the surface of our lives. We begin to block out distractions and sharpen the focus of all our senses toward God and His work—in nature, in others, in events, and in ourselves.

The method of visio divina, in brief:

- 1) Surrender to God. Set aside about 15-20 minutes of quiet, uninterrupted time and start by inviting God’s Spirit to speak to you. Setting an alarm may help you “ignore” time constraints.
- 2) Meditate on the image. Notice what is dominant, possibly the first thing that catches your eye. Keep your eyes there. What do you notice? What moves you? Ponder your emotional response. Then allow your eyes to wander around the image. Notice color, shape, contrast, overall impressions. Be gentle and open, both with yourself and the image.
- 3) Pray about your meditation. Talk to God directly and take time to listen. How does the Spirit connect this image to your life? To God and His Word? As you gaze on this image, is God in some way gazing at you? Are you moved to amazement, silence, rest, repentance, gratefulness, action, confession, adoration, or dance? What invitations might God have for you? Consider journaling your prayer response.
- 4) Surrender again to God and rest with thankfulness in His loving presence with you.

## APPENDIX 5

### Prayer of Examen

As written by Ann Weaver (used by permission)

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.” Philippians 1:9-10

“For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” Colossians 1:9

### Prayer of Examen Steps

#### 1. Prepare: **Quiet yourself in God’s presence**

Jesus said to his disciples,  
“I have said these things to you while I am still with you.” John 14:25

#### 2. **Invite the Holy Spirit’s presence:** Dear God, we invite the Holy Spirit’s presence, to help us review the past 24 hours. Help us listen carefully to what you are saying.

Jesus said to them,  
“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will tell you everything and remind you of all that I have said.” John 14:26

#### 3. **Give thanks for the good gifts of the Day**

Jesus assured his disciples,  
“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.  
I do not give to you as the world gives.  
Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” John 14:27

Think back over the day and give thanks for the good gifts of the day including people, places and events. (List these good gifts.)

4. **Review the past 24 hours:**

“...Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.  
You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.  
Abide in me as I abide in you.” John 15: 1-4

Engage the following questions to review the past 24 hours. Review your thoughts, words, deeds, desires, consolations, and desolations. Listen with God.

- a. What excited or energized me?
- b. What depressed or depleted me?
- c. Where did I have strong negative or positive emotions?
- d. How was God present with me?
- e. What are God’s invitations to me?

5. **Express concerns and pray for grace:** Express to God any concerns that have come up during the Examen. Pray for the specific graces you desire for the future (today or tomorrow).

Group Sharing questions:

- What surprises did you find in this prayer time?
- Where did you most experience God?
- What is God’s invitation to you?
- How is this prayer practice helpful in learning to discern what God is saying as we desire to make decisions in line with God’s will?

Note: This practice can be done with children at the supper table. It’s called “Happies and Crappies.” Each evening at supper everyone gets to say something fun or difficult about the day. Then ask the question: “How was God with you as you experienced this happy (or crappy) event?”

Resources:

*Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Calhoun, pp 58-61  
*The Way of Discernment* by Elizabeth Leibert, pp 3-6  
*Guidebook to Prayer* by Mary Kate Morse, pp 87-91